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NEW WRITINGS IN SF-8 EDITED BY JOHN CARNELL

New Writings In  
SF-8

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# SF 8

Edited By  
John Carnell  
Featuring  
Synth By  
Keith Roberts

Colin Kapp: The Pen And The Dark  
Gerald W. Page: Spacemen Live Forever  
R. W. Mackelworth: The Final Solution  
John Rackham: Computer's Mate  
John Baxter: Tryst



The major story in the eighth volume of *New Writings in SF* is Keith Roberts' *Synth*, an exciting and completely new idea concerning a synthetic woman. In *The Pen And The Dark*, Colin Kapp brings back his Unorthodox Engineers to cope with a sinister and inexplicable phenomena on an alien planet. Gerald W. Page and John Rackham have both written stories which explore various aspects of life aboard a space vessel. *Tryst* by John Baxter is a faintly eerie tale of a dying Empire and, finally, R. W. Mackelworth offers a horrifying theory about a Master Race.

Also edited by JOHN CARNELL

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JOHN CARNELL  
NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—8



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## FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

IN direct contrast to the stories in the last volume, four of the six stories in this eighth volume of *New Writings In S-F* have one or more connections with space travel either as the focal point of the plot or as a means of placing characters in alien environments. Space stories have been with us a long time and will be part of the *genre* as long as science fiction is published, for the number of permutations on the theme is almost infinite. What is particularly interesting, however, is the nature of the changes now taking place in this particular theme.

For instance, three of our four space stories contain female characters who are an integral part of each plot, whereas ten years or so ago the only woman who ever appeared in a s-f story was usually the mad scientist's daughter and she was only included as a conversation piece for her father to explain his experiments. Here, in John Rackham's "Computer's Mate", we have the logical crew of married couples instead of intrepid male explorers, while Australian author John Baxter's story deals more with the quest for the sender of a box of rose petals than the robotic environment his plot visualizes. Similarly, new American writer Gerald W. Page presents a long-voyage story which points up the problem between an immortal man and a mortal woman in "Spacemen Live Forever".

The major story in this volume, "Synth", is even more revolutionary. Keith Roberts, who is fast becoming one of Britain's most promising new writers, has tackled the delicate theme of a synthetic woman being involved in a

major divorce case—as the co-respondent! Even a few years ago this type of plot would not have been published, but today, with the s-f story at last becoming humanized, such a plot *can* be written if handled properly—and Mr. Roberts manages this beautifully (and sometimes humorously) as the case for the defence and prosecution unfolds in the court room.

On the all-male front and following his success with “The Subways Of Tazoo” in *New Writings In S-F* 3, Colin Kapp brings back his Unorthodox Engineers to try and solve another alien problem in “The Pen And The Dark”, a story dealing with contra-terrene matter and energy; and R. W. Mackelworth presents a clash between two Master Races in “The Final Solution”.

This brief Foreword is mainly meant to be an *apéritif*. The main courses follow immediately and do far more justice to the craft of s-f writing than any preliminary summary I care to write.

JOHN CARNELL

February 1966

## THE PEN AND THE DARK

by

COLIN KAPP

*The Unorthodox Engineers are presented with another fascinating mystery—an indestructible pillar of darkness left by an alien race on an otherwise normal planet. For what purpose? And how solve the problem of contra-energy?*



## THE PEN AND THE DARK

THE scudder slid through candy-floss clouds of cirrus and strato-cumulus so extremely Earthlike in formation that even the scudder's well-travelled occupants felt a twinge of nostalgia for home. Far below, the green and gilded fields proudly displayed the rich bust of the planet Ithica ripening in the rays of the G-type primary. The occasional sprawl of town or metropolis betrayed the Terran origin of Ithica's inhabitants and the results of their desire to recreate the image of a far-off homeworld. With a little imagination this could easily have been mistaken for one of the rarer spots on Earth.

But when the scudder cleared the haze of the cloud formation, the black and fearsome thing which reared above them was decidedly not of Earth.

Caught on a sudden and curious down-draught, the scudder dived steeply and then went into a mammoth power-climb that took it soaring into a wide and safe helical orbit around and finally above the hideous patch of darkness.

"So that's it!" said Lieutenant Fritz Van Noon.

Dr. Maxwell Courtney nodded. "That's it. That's what we call the Dark. What you see now is the mushroom dome. It's all of twenty-five kilometres across, and as near indestructible as anything we've ever encountered. We put a nuclear Hell-raiser down on to it and nothing happened at all."

Van Noon raised a swift eyebrow. "Nothing?"

"We know the device exploded, because we were able to detect the start of the priming flash. After that—nothing. The Dark absorbed every quantum of energy released. It

swallowed the whole damn lot and never so much as flickered."

"And you say that aliens put it there?"

"So the records read. About two hundred terrayears ago—long before we re-established contact with Ithica. It would seem some sort of alien vessel made a touchdown on the edge of the city, stayed a night, then vanished as abruptly as it had come. But in its place it left this pillar of darkness, and nobody has ever found out why they left it or what it's supposed to do. There's a great many theories about it, but none which completely explains the facts. Some think that it soaks up energy and transmits it elsewhere. Some think it's contra-terrene. It's even suggested that an alien colony lives inside it."

"And what's your own opinion?" asked Van Noon.

Courtney shrugged. "After three years of scientific examination I still don't know what to think. At some time or another I've held most of the current physical theories only to discard them for another."

"Is it uniform right the way down?"

"It's really shaped like a bolt," said Courtney. "The shaft proper is about seven kilometres in diameter and about thirty kilometres high. It is capped by the mushroom head here which extends out to about twenty-five kilometres in diameter and apparently defines the region of the Pen."

"The Pen?" Van Noon looked up from his notes. "What's that?"

Courtney smiled fleetingly. "Sorry! That's local terminology. I mean the apparent penumbral shadow of reduced effects which surrounds the pillar of Dark. It's a twilight region about nine kilometres average depth, the outer reaches of which are easily penetrable, and the inner regions connect with the Dark. It has an interesting sub-climate too—but you'll see that for yourself later."

Van Noon scowled. "And you have no idea at all what the Dark is made of?"

Courtney spread his hands. "It's commonly assumed to be contra-terrene, as I said, but I don't think the hypothesis holds water in the face of all the evidence. But God-alone knows what it really is. Even the Pen raises some nice problems in physics which don't have answers in any of the textbooks we know."

"All right," said Van Noon. "I'd like to take a closer look at it first and come back to you when I've some idea of what questions to ask."

"I rather hoped you'd do it that way," Courtney said. "We've assembled such a mass of data on the Dark that we don't know if we've lost our way in our own erudition. That's why we asked for some of you Unorthodox Engineering chaps to come out to Ithica to supply a fresh approach. The answer may be so damned obvious that we can't see it for the weight of the maths intervening."

"And the primary object of the exercise is what?"

Courtney glanced from the window at the monstrous column of darkness which reared its head high over the landscape. "I don't know. Study it, use it, get rid of it—it's an alien paradox, Fritz, and I don't think anyone with an ounce of science in his makeup can let it rest there doing nothing but soaking up the sun."

"What's the general topography of the Dark area, Jacko?"

Jacko Hine of the Unorthodox Engineers unrolled his sheaf of maps. "This is the position of the Dark, and the area I've coloured shows the extent of the Pen. As you can see, the whole is centred on the edge of what used to be the city of Bethlem."

"Is the city still there?"

"Its ruins are. The present city of New Bethlem has moved southwards, but in and around the Pen the remains of the old city still exist. Nobody lives there now. If you'd been into the Pen you'd understand why."

"You've been in, then? What's it like?"

"Weird," said Jacko. "It's cold and dull, but the sensations aren't the usual ones of coldness and dullness. This is a different feeling entirely. I can't quite explain it, but there's something wrong with the physics of the place."

"Then I think I'd better start there. Where's the rest of the U.E. squad?"

"Doing some preliminary fact-finding at the edge of the Pen. I suggest we can contact them as we go in, and see what they've found."

"No," said Van Noon. "I'd sooner contact them on the way out. I want my first impressions of the Pen to be a direct personal experience. I need to get the 'feel' of the thing—because I have a suspicion that this problem is going to be cracked by intuition rather than by observation. Maxwell Courtney's no fool, and he and his team have been gathering facts for three years now. There's no sense in repeating what they've already done, so I'm going to play it my way."

"I was rather afraid of that," said Jacko, following in his wake.

The edgeland was an area dominated by the ruins of the old city. The transport took them to the very perimeter of the Pen, and here they dismounted. Van Noon surveyed the phenomenon thoughtfully.

The termination of the Pen was sharp, precise, and unwavering. At one point the magnificent sunshine of Ithica baked the dust golden and ripened dark berries on the hanks of hackberry-like scrub. A centimetre away the summer changed abruptly to a dark winter, shadowed and uninviting, and such scrub as grew within its bounds was thin and gnarled and bore no fruit at all.

Above them the wall of shade rose vertically until it disappeared into the cloud-ring which clung stubbornly round the sombre column. Looking into the Pen, Van Noon gained the impression of gradually increasing coldness and bleak-

ness and gloom until, in the centre, he could just detect the absolute blackness of the great pillar of the Dark. Cautiously he extended a hand into the boundary of the Pen and withdrew it, experiencing the strange chill on his skin.

"Very curious," he said. "What strikes you most about this, Jacko?"

"Lack of interaction between the warmth outside and the cold inside."

"Precisely. At a guess there's a temperature fall of fifteen degrees centigrade over a distance of one centimetre. Now there's plenty of heat capacity available out here, so why doesn't the warmth penetrate farther into the Pen?"

"There's only one answer. The heat is being removed."

"Yes, but I don't see how. Even if you postulate that in the centre of the Pen is an area of absolute zero temperature you would still expect to get a graduated temperature rise at the boundary and not a sharp transition such as you have here."

"So?" Jacko looked at him expectantly.

"So I can see how to achieve the inverse of this situation using, for instance, a collimated beam of infra-red heat. But a collimated shaft of coldness is something very new indeed. As you remarked, Jacko, there's something wrong with the physics of this place."

With swift resolution Van Noon stepped through the perimeter and into the Pen. Jacko pulled up his collar and followed him in. The contrast was staggering. Whereas a few seconds previously the Ithican warmth had been sufficient to bring them to a gentle sweat, they now stood shivering with the curious chill which inhabited the Pen. Van Noon was looking with amazement at the dreary landscape and sub-climate of the Pen interior.

The bright Ithican sunlight did not penetrate. The internal winter continued sheer up to the outer wall, and such light as there was filtered downwards from a dirty, leaden cloudbase trapped within the Pen itself. Even look-

ing sunward, no sign of the Ithican primary could be seen, though it should have been clearly visible, and its apparent loss was not explicable in terms of haze or diffraction.

The sun-toasted ruins which stood outside the Pen continued inside as a depressing waste of rotting bricks and slimed timbers, forming forgotten streets on which even the sparse and miserable vegetation had not much cared to grow. A few furred rodents scattered at their approach, with an attitude of resignation, as if self-preservation here was a matter about which one thought twice.

Van Noon was sampling his surroundings with the detachment of a scientist, yet using his own body in lieu of instrumentation. The process went on for several minutes before he came to a conclusion.

"What do you feel, Jacko?"

"Cold."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, dull. I don't know if it's physical or psychological, but every action seems to demand too much effort."

"You're right there," said Fritz. "I found the same thing myself, and I don't think it's psychological. It's almost as if every form of energy here was negated or opposed."

He picked up a stone. "Watch! I want to throw it through the window in the old wall over there."

He threw the stone with practised ease, having judged its weight to a nicety. But the stone lost speed rapidly and fell in a limp trajectory to the muddied soil several metres short of its intended target.

"See what I mean?" said Van Noon. "That stone, accelerated to the velocity at which I released it, should at least have hit the wall. But it didn't. It acted as a lighter body might have done on travelling through these conditions—or as a body of its actual weight might have done had it somehow lost kinetic energy during flight. How do you lose kinetic energy from a body in flight, Jacko?"

"You can't lose it," said Jacko. "You can only react it

against something—friction, air-resistance, and so on—in which case the energy leaves the system in some other form, usually heat. The energy itself is never lost, only converted.”

“But here it wasn’t,” said Van Noon. “I wasn’t throwing against a headwind, and the air in here is no more dense than outside after allowing for temperature and humidity differences. So whatever stopped that stone wasn’t a normal reaction to flight. And I can find no evidence of abnormal gravity or coriolis effects. That stone just progressively lost energy. Mass times velocity doesn’t seem to equal momentum in the Pen—and that’s a hell of a smack at the textbooks you and I were raised on.”

“Working outside the textbooks never worried you before,” said Jacko. “Let’s get out of this place, Fritz. It’s giving me the creeps.”

“In a minute, Jacko. I’d like to explore a bit farther in first.”

They walked together down the remains of a long-forgotten road, treading wearily on the slimed cobbles of the surface. The environment was desolate and forlorn, with an air of perpetual dampness and slow rot and reluctant fungus. As they penetrated to greater depths the gloom grew perceptibly greater, and the cold chill reached a degree where it would have been unwise to remain too long without the protection of additional clothing. Vegetable and animal life were here almost completely absent, and the slime and fungus showed plainly that even the lower life-forms were maintaining their hold only with the greatest difficulty. Even organic decay had not progressed far after two centuries of perpetual winter.

“What are we looking for, Fritz?”

“I don’t know, Jacko. It’s the feel of this cold that has me puzzled. I don’t feel I’m cold just because the environment is cold. I feel I’m cold because my body is radiating more heat than it should at these temperatures. To judge

from the feel of my skin it's about five degrees below freezing point here."

"Agreed," said Jacko. "Well below freezing, certainly."

"Then just an observation," said Van Noon. "Why aren't the puddles of water frozen? It's my guess that a thermometer wouldn't give much below ten centigrade. It's the same effect that we encountered at the perimeter of the Pen—radiant heat being opposed by something only explicable as radiant cold."

"I don't understand that, Fritz. After all, cold is only the absence of heat."

"I wonder," said Van Noon, "if that isn't a limitation to thinking which we've imposed upon ourselves. What happens if we postulate a phenomenon called contra-heat, which we treat as the conventional electromagnetic heat radiation but with the signs reversed?"

"There's no such animal," objected Jacko.

"No? Fetch some equipment in here and compare the radiant heat loss against temperature and I think you'll find there is. There has to be. There's nothing else you could set up in an equation which would go half way to meeting all the facts."

Something crackled and spat unexpectedly behind them with a sound like a multiple pistol shot. They whirled round and stopped in quick amazement. Between them and their path out of the Pen was quite the smallest and darkest and lowest thundercloud they had ever seen. The bottom of the cloud hung probably not more than thirty metres above the ground, and its inky-black consistency made them think of vapours other than those of the air, though this was probably a trick of light and circumstance.

But it was the lightning which gave them pause to think: vicious arcs between ground and cloud which started to stab with all the anticipated brilliance and fire but which were curiously extinguished by some constrictive phenomenon which pinched the plasma and

quenched the arc. The result was a staccato "pop" instead of a thunderclap, and a rate of lightning repetition which occasionally generated a continuous tearing noise rather than the usual sounds of storm. But there was no doubting the destructive potential of the lightning bolts.

Moved by unfelt winds, the thundercloud was drawing rapidly nearer, and Van Noon was more than a little apprehensive.

"Better find some shelter, Jacko. This could be dangerous."

They looked about them. The ruins of a hovel, partly roofed with sloped and perilous slates, provided the nearest offer of sanctuary. This they accepted, and squatted within the miserable, damp, boxlike walls while the cloud moved overhead. Lightning stabbed at the path outside with a viciousness which seemed to contain some element of personal malice, but finally it passed. The cloud went spitting and snarling on towards the pillar of the Dark, and Van Noon and Jacko emerged to watch its progress.

"I'll teach Maxwell Courtney to speak of 'interesting sub-climate'," said Van Noon ominously. "Let's get out of here, Jacko."

"You know, Fritz, I was just about to suggest the self-same thing myself."

"That was what they call a rogue storm," said Courtney. "In the Pen you meet them quite a lot. They seem to form and disperse almost spontaneously, but while they last they can be very dangerous. They always travel fast, and always in straight lines. If caught in the open we avoid them by simply running out of the way."

They were seated in Courtney's office in New Bethlem, and the broad windows of the room opened to a distant view of the Pen and its core of Dark. Courtney's desk faced the window as if to give him a constant reminder of the broad enigma to which his life was currently dedicated. The attitude of his visitors' chairs showed that they were

no less aware of the dominating influence of the looming column of shades.

"Well," said Van Noon. "We've gathered a little data of our own on a preliminary survey, and I'm told you have acquired data by the ton. That puts you in a good position for answering questions, and me for asking them."

"Ask away," said Courtney. "I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I can do you a nice line in inexplicable facts."

"What can you tell me about anti-energy or contra-energy effects?"

Courtney whistled softly. "That's a piece of fast thinking, Fritz. It took us two years before we could bring ourselves to consider the hypothesis seriously. But I know what you're thinking. Most of the physical effects observed in the Pen can be satisfactorily explained only by thinking in terms of polar opposition—negation by precisely defined effects of exactly opposite character. The fact that these opposite effects are completely unknown to nature outside the Pen doesn't necessarily invalidate the case for their existence inside the Pen. The very nature of the Pen and the Dark is obviously extra-physical, or we'd not have a problem in the first place."

"Precisely!" said Van Noon. "But you do admit the possibility of contra-energy?"

Courtney spread his hands. "I admit it as a possibility. It's certainly a basic premise which fits all the observed facts in the Pen. But it's only one premise among many, and it doesn't have much to commend it when you consider it a little deeper."

"Go on," said Van Noon.

"Let's take an extreme case," said Courtney. "You can prove it for yourself, or take my word for it, that the difference between the Pen and the dark is purely one of degree. Whereas energy negation in the Pen is only partial, that of the Dark is absolute."

"I'll take your word for it. I'd guessed it anyway."

"Good. Now consider this: no matter what intensity, character, or type of energy we have applied to the Dark, we have had no discernible effect upon it, nor have we been able to pass any energy through even a thin sector of it. We have encountered absolute negation, Fritz, of any energy applied in any way. If you stick to your contra theory the implications are too complex to be true, and rather frightening."

"I think I understand you," said Van Noon, "but I'd rather hear it your way."

"I'll put it as simply as I can. If we fire a projectile at it, according to your theory that projectile needs to be met precisely at the perimeter of the Dark by what is effectively a counter projectile of identical mass travelling at an identical velocity to a precisely identical point. That makes too many coincidences for my orthodox-type stomach. And again, suppose we use X-ray bombardment or any other form of radiation. For precise negation this would need to be met at the identical point by contra radiation of the same intensity, wavelength, and phase as that which we apply. Either the Dark is an extremely broadband transmitter capable of producing any type of force, energy, intensity, and phase of radiation at any point on its perimeter at any instant without prior notice—accurately and instantaneously—or else the Dark is full of little green men with an uncanny knack of anticipating our test programme and arranging their contra facilities to suit."

"I get the point," said Fritz. "How do you arrange to fire a projectile to meet an unexpected projectile head-on with precisely matched mass and velocity and to an impact position predetermined to an accuracy of plus or minus a few microns? It can't be done. You've shaken some of my confidence, but you still haven't encompassed the impossible."

"No? Then I'll do so right away. For your contra theory to be true, the Dark would need to be a dynamic entity. It must necessarily give out exactly as much energy as it receives, for the negation to be complete. It's been here for two hundred years, Fritz. Now calculate two hundred years of radiant energy from the Ithican sun alone and then add what we've flung at it in the last three years of experiment. You'll see that it would need the energy resources of a small star in order to have the reserves to meet any demand. We dropped a nuclear Hell-raiser on it, and a Hell-raiser is a planet-buster, remember. What sort of power supply could conceivably meet a demand like that instantaneously?"

"I don't know," said Van Noon, "but we can't yet claim to know the ultimate in power sources. But very soon I intend to find a way into the Dark, and then perhaps we'll find out."

"You can't do it, Fritz. There isn't a ghost of a chance of penetrating into the Dark."

"I think there is. And I think I know the very way in which it might be done."

"Whatever made you say that?" asked Jacko anxiously, as they left the room.

"It's a feeling I have," said Van Noon. "I said I was going to play this by intuition, and right now my intuition tells me that the Pen and the Dark are contra-energy effects."

"In spite of what Courtney said?"

"Certainly. I must admit he had a nice point about the projectile needing to be met effectively by a contra projectile if the contra-energy theory was to be maintained. It wouldn't actually need to be met by a contra projectile, but merely by an opposing force of the right sort applied in the right place at the right time. I don't doubt that Courtney's correct that such a negation is necessary to substantiate the contra theory. But I do suspect that his data

on absolute negation is not quite as complete as he imagines."

"In what way, Fritz?"

"Well, I can't conceive of a continuous pattern of negative energy which could deal with any sort of force or radiation applied at any point at any time. I can, however, conceive of a pattern of contra radiation or effect which is selectively produced in response to a particular stimulus at a particular point. But you see what this involves?"

"No," said Jacko.

"It involves detection, analysis, and synthesis of a contra effect. Three steps—which must necessitate some sort of time-lag. Courtney has established that any applied energy is negated—but I doubt if it can be negated instantaneously. The three steps may be completed in nano-seconds, but I'm quite sure that a time-lag must exist. Now I want to go into the Pen, right up to the Dark perimeter, and see if we can prove or disprove this."

"And if we prove it?"

"Then I think we'll have a way to drive a tunnel into the Dark and see what's inside."

Jacko lost his power of speech as his mind strove to contain the enormity of the project. Fritz shot him an amused glance, and continued.

"There's a particular reason I want to go in, Jacko. There's a second principle involved in this detection, analysis, contra-synthesis set-up which you might not have thought of. Something else is implied . . . and that something is some form of guiding intelligence."

They had chosen heavy caterpillar crawlers for their transport into the Pen. The choice was determined not only by the fact that a tracked vehicle was an advantage over the broken terrain but also for the reason that the vehicles possessed magnificently powerful engines and an ample reserve of power. Three crawlers were obtained for the ex-

pedition; one to run well ahead, one to act as reserve, and one to stay well in the rear with sufficient rescue equipment to recover either of the leading crawlers should the deeper Pen effects exceed the capacity of the engines to keep the vehicles in motion.

Clothing for the party had been chosen for a simple property-thermal insulation. Although the actual temperature of the deep Pen probably did not reach freezing point it was essential to insulate the radiant heat of a man's body against the contra-heat effect which would otherwise have striven to reduce the temperature of a man to the ambient point, with lethal effect. In this way the cold of the Pen differed from normal cold, and the expeditionary figures were clad as though for a journey to the arctic.

Once clear into the outer perimeter of the Pen and out of the strong Ithican sunshine, the expedition began to appreciate the clothing which up to that point had caused them a barely tolerable condition of overheating. Now, as the light faded and the chill of the perpetual winter closed around them, they grew more comfortable. But the underlying seriousness of the venture was pointed-up by a change in the engine note to a more laboured level as both the functioning of the engine and the momentum of the vehicle were affected by the contra elements of the Pen.

The leading crawler carried the bulk of the equipment, especially the precious lasers with which it was hoped to establish the existence of a time lag in the Dark phenomena. Van Noon was captaining the vehicle. Jacko was driving, and Pederson, an observer sent by Courtney, completed the party. Van Noon had intended their route to follow a road indicated on the old maps as running for nearly two kilometres straight in the direction of the axis of the Dark. The intention was abandoned quickly on finding that a building of considerable proportions had collapsed, turning part of the road into an unnavigable pile of

masonry. The maps were forgotten and a new route was improvised as the situation demanded, having regard to the abilities of the crawler and taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the slow erosion of the Pen environment on the fabric of the old town.

The light from the trapped cloudbase became increasingly leaden and dull until, at about five kilometres in from the perimeter of the Pen, Jacko was forced to switch on the headlamps. Their effect was negligible. Such light as they produced was robbed by some contra effect in the Pen environment and did little to disperse the muddy gloom. Van Noon had anticipated this and had a searchlight mounted on the roof of the crawler. The intensity of light from this was sufficient to permit their passage through the damp, dilapidated, ghost-like streets of Bethlem to within two kilometres of the Dark itself. Then that illumination too became inadequate.

"Better get out, Jacko, and let's estimate the situation," said Van Noon.

They descended, conscious of the acute contra-heat coldness which searched at their shrouded faces and probed at their wrists and ankles. They were conscious too, now, of contra-momentum, which gave an entirely false impression of the density of the air, since the effect was remarkably like trying to move under water.

Pederson joined them, and they made a brief survey of the situation. Whereas from a greater distance the column of the Dark had been clearly visible, it was now merged into the claylike blankness of scene which made it scarcely distinguishable as a separate entity. Jacko tried the radio communicator, but the instrument was dead save for some rare static from a distant rogue storm. The magnetic compass also had become nonfunctional much earlier, and though the gyro compass still purred unhappily in its box its readings were questionable in view of the conditions under which it was operating.

The quality of light from the cloudbase was curious and unreal. Effectively the light from above should have given them far greater incident and reflected illumination than they actually experienced. This drastic attenuation of the light should have been explicable in terms of fog or haze, but nothing such existed, and their inexpressibly dreary state of near-night had no explanation save for that of an alien opposition to the fundamental laws of physics.

"What are we going to do, Fritz?" Jacko's own attempt to resolve the situation had reached an impasse.

Van Noon looked back, hoping for an indication as to whether or not the second crawler had been able to follow their tortuous route to the spot. No evidence was forthcoming, so he shrugged his shoulders.

"You two can vote me down if you want to, but I propose that we choose the most likely direction for the Dark and just drive blind until we hit it or stop."

"I'm with you," said Jacko. "What about you, Peder-son?"

"Count me in. I've no ambition to walk back on my own."

They re-entered the crawler. Having decided on the most probable direction of the Dark, Jacko orientated the vehicle, locked the tracks on synchronization, and proceeded to drive straight into the unknown.

The journey was a driver's conception of Hell, a nightmare route across unfamiliar territory, effectively blind, and with no warning of what obstacle might halt or jolt them. Added to this was the rising resistance to movement, both on the part of the vehicle and of its occupants. Inside the driving cab even the instrument lights had become impossible to see, and the penetrating coldness finalized the depression which was settling over the spearhead of the expedition. Once or twice Jacko questioned whether they ought to attempt to turn back. Van Noon chided him gently and looked only ahead to the point where the dark-

ness ought to terminate in a meeting with the absolute of the Dark.

Constantly the vehicle rolled and bucked, and canted at dangerous angles as it encountered broken walls or piles of debris in its path. Sometimes it stopped with a bruising shock against some obstacle beyond its power to move. Jacko was skilful in such emergencies and withdrew the vehicle from each such predicament without stalling the engine, knowing that a stopped engine this far into the Pen would never be restarted. Bruised, and in constant danger from masonry from grazed walls crushing the cab, they endured the journey patiently; although with various deviations from the course which the presence of unsurmountable obstacles forced on Jacko, they had no certain idea if they were still headed towards the Dark at all.

Then came the moment they had been dreading. In pitch darkness now, the crawler came to a sudden halt against something immovable. The tracks churned the soft floor uselessly for a half second, and then the engine stalled before Jacko could throw the vehicle in reverse. He tried the ignition cycle in vain, but the contra effects were too powerful to permit the heavy engine to be restarted. The silence grew absolute save for the tick-tick of metal cooling rapidly and Fritz's voice cursing in a strangely muted way.

"End of the line," said Jacko finally.

Van Noon opened the door. "As we've managed to get here we may as well see where we are," he said.

They climbed out. Their powerful torches were about as useful as glow-worms, and permitted an examination of no object more distant than about a quarter of a metre. Beyond this was darkness in all directions except directly vertical, where a muddied stain across the sky mocked them with its inability to provide any useful illumination on the ground. Van Noon searched around him and picked up a short length of rotting timber with which he cast about in the darkness on all sides. Then he called urgently.

"Jacko, are you near the crawler?"

"I am," said Pederson. "Just by the cab door." He banged the metal, which returned a dull and unrewarding thud. Like their voices, the sound was strangely attenuated.

"Good! Now, Jacko, can you place yourself by sound in a line between our two voices?"

Jacko moved somewhere in the darkness. "I think I'm there."

"Right. Now we're three in a line, with Pederson on the right, you central, and myself on the left. As far as I can make out, about three paces ahead of us is the Dark. Find something to probe it with, and don't touch it even with your gloves. Maintain your orientation carefully so that you don't lose direction and walk into it. It could be very dangerous to touch."

They advanced slowly, Pederson tapping the side of the crawler for identification, and Fritz and Jacko talking so that the sound of voices gave their relative positions. Even so, Jacko got there first. His probe was a shard of splintered ceramic with which he was striking before him as though at some anticipated enemy. Contra-momentum made this a difficult movement to achieve, and the darkness added to the soup-like resistance to movement, giving the whole situation a dream-like character without the visual qualities of the conventional nightmare.

Then Jacko hit the Dark. It was detectable by its complete negation of the force with which he struck it. And it returned no sound, and in this way was distinguishable from any ordinary obstacle struck with force.

"Got it," said Jacko. "But that knocking sound you hear is my knees. I admit I'm frightened of this thing, Fritz."

"I'm not exactly keen on it, either," said Van Noon. "But this is what we came to see. It's a pity we can't see it now we've got here. Have you any suggestions, Pederson?"

"I've just discovered the Dark is what we ran the crawler into. No wonder it didn't move."

An ominous and familiar staccato rattle made them turn. A rogue storm, travelling towards them and parallel to the wall of the Dark, was making its passage known by its peculiarly pinched lightning. Because of attenuation, the lightning and thunder had been undetectable even from a short distance, and the storm was almost upon them before they were aware it existed. There was no time to seek shelter. They flung themselves down on the damp earth at the foot of the Dark and waited for it to pass. It sprayed the area with quenched fire as it went, doing no damage to them, but the intensity of the arcs was such that momentarily they had a clear picture of their situation.

The Dark was just in front of them, a sheer wall of unblemished black-velvet nothingness, impossibly perfect. The crawler had nosed head-on up to the black wall, and its tracks were pressed hard against the exterior. On all other sides of them lay the ghost-suburb of desolate ruins, the reflecting white teeth of broken masonry contrasting with the wet, black, soilstones of the earth.

As soon as the worst of the storm was over, they climbed back to their feet.

"What are you going to do, Fritz? Try the lasers?"

"I don't know." Fritz had moved back to the crawler and was examining the tracks in contact with the Dark by the spasmodic light of the rapidly waning storm. "I don't think we need to, Jacko. I think I've got my answer. You see, it did take time for the Dark to analyse and apply a counterforce to stop the crawler. But that fraction of a second was sufficient for something significant to happen. The crawler tracks have penetrated very slightly into the Dark."

It was impossible for the others to verify Van Noon's statement since the light from the storm had rapidly become eclipsed by the strength of the contra effects. The combined output of searchlight and torches failed to re-establish the point, and the lasers refused to function from

the crawler's emergency power supply. But Van Noon was sufficiently convinced of what he had seen to regard the expedition as a success.

"All we have to do now is to get back to tell the tale," said Jacko, unhappily.

They started back by the only means available—they walked. For the first half kilometre they stumbled blindly through the darkness and the nightmare of contra-momentum. The coldness, too, was becoming serious now that they were exposed for a long period without the protection of the crawler cab. But gradually their eyes, accustomed to complete darkness, began to discern light like the first touch of dawn, and with the returning ability to see, they no longer blundered into blind paths in the ruins from which they had to retreat by sense of touch alone. And the contra-effects grew slightly less, so that their pace progressively improved as they made their way out of the deep Pen regions.

Two kilometres away from the Dark they came across the crushed path that their own crawler had made on its way in, and this they followed gratefully. Shortly they found the second crawler, abandoned, and with its engine stalled and cold. The third crawler was patrolling a broad front along a road about three kilometres radius from the Dark perimeter. They were hailed and taken aboard for the last part of the journey through the growing light and finally out into the unbearably bright gold sunset of an Ithican evening.

Courtney was there to greet them. His team had spent the day re-running exploratory tests, but this time with particular reference to the onset-time of negation. His results amply confirmed Van Noon's experience. There was a time-lag on the introduction of any energy phenomenon to the Dark or the Pen before negation set in. The exact period of the lag varied with the type of phenomenon, but was greatest for applied physical force.

The Ithican government, sensing promise in the issue, had already granted almost unlimited facilities to aid any practical application of the idea. On Van Noon's behalf Courtney had accepted the challenge, and the party rode with buoyant spirits back to New Bethlem where work on the next phase of Fritz's plans against the Dark were just about to begin.

"A tunnel?" said Jacko.

"Strictly speaking," said Van Noon, "I had in mind something more in the nature of a horizontal well, but I think a tunnel is a fair description."

"And just how do you propose to sink a horizontal well into the Dark?"

"Frankly, I don't see much difficulty. We take an ordinary iron pipe of sufficient dimension to permit the passage of a man—and just knock it in."

"Crazy like a fox!" said Jacko. "We're talking about the Dark—the great energy negator. In the name of Moses, how do you just knock a pipe into that?"

"I thought I'd already demonstrated that," said Fritz. "There's a time-lag before the onset of negation. Apply a pile driver or something to your pipe and hit it once and it will penetrate the Dark just a little before the detection, analysis, contra synthesis has a chance to stop it. Then the negation will be applied and stop the tube going in any farther, and the system will reach stasis. The contra-force obviously cannot continue to be applied after the original force has ceased to operate, so the force, contra-force balance will then relax."

"So?"

"So then you hit your pipe again and drive it in a little more. And so on. And providing you work on a completely random and non-predictable basis there's no chance of the contra-force being applied in anticipation. I suspect that only if we set up a standard repetition rate will we meet

with complete and instantaneous negation of the force that we apply."

"So we knock in our tube. Then what?"

"It depends on what we find. The Dark may be a solid or it may be a thin-wall phenomenon. If it's a solid we shall not gain much except for a little knowledge. But if it's thin-wall, then we might have a chance to look inside."

"From which you're assuming that the Dark effect won't penetrate inside the pipe."

"I think it may to some extent, but take any physical phenomenon and place an inch of steel in front of it and you always get some modification or attenuation, if not a complete shutoff. I don't see that the situation should be materially different for contra-physical phenomena. With a bit of luck we should be able to get through."

"What do you think's inside there, Fritz?"

"As I see it, Jacko, some form of intelligence, but I wouldn't like to guess any closer than that. Whether the Dark is some cosmic amoeba or has inside it a complex of little green men is something I intend to find out. Are you with me?"

"I'm right behind you," said Jacko. "But don't ask me to be the first man through that ruddy pipe."

By the time that Courtney returned to the base camp a few days later Van Noon's plans were fairly well advanced. Fritz described the scheme briefly. Courtney was intrigued but doubtful.

"I don't see," he said, "how you're going to drive a pipe of that diameter into the Dark—remembering that the driving has to be done in the deep Pen area where the contra-momentum is killing. You'd never get a horizontal pile driver to work under those conditions."

"No. We've already taken care of that point by taking a new line entirely. We're going to fire it in."

"Fire it?"

"Yes. Attach the free end of the pipe to what is effectively a large-bore gun or reaction chamber with an open muzzle pointing away from the Dark. In the gun we fire a high-explosive charge and let the recoil of the apparatus drive the pipe against the Dark. According to my calculations, a series of explosive shocks should have the right sort of driving characteristics for the job. How does it sound as an idea?"

"It could work," admitted Courtney. "Unless we're up against something we don't know about yet. How far have you got with the project."

"We've managed to get the lengths of pipe into the Dark area, and the gun chamber is there also. There's trouble keeping handling equipment working so far into the Pen, but we've managed somehow. We should be ready to start firing sometime tomorrow. Have you been able to get the extra stuff I asked for?"

"Most of it's outside on the carriers, and the generators will arrive in the morning. Here's the radiation monitor, trolley-mounted as specified. I only hope it fits into the pipe."

"I'll try it out," said Van Noon. "I can run it through our test length and if it doesn't fit we can modify it before it goes into the Pen."

He wheeled the small apparatus-laden trolley to the length of pipe that ran down the workshop where they had been fabricating the gun chamber. The trolley fitted easily into the interior of the pipe and, to give himself a little practice, he crawled in after it and pushed it before him. The iron confines of the pipe returned the roar of the small casters with a noise like a train speeding through a tunnel. When Van Noon reached the far end he found that Jacko had returned and was peering anxiously down the pipe.

"Why the sound effects, Fritz?"

"Eh? Oh, this? It's the radiation detector. It's obvious that even the iron of the pipe can't do more than attenuate

some wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum—and the same presumably applies to the contra spectrum. So just to be on the safe side Courtney has knocked up a combined range monitor which should cover anything likely to be dangerous but not detectable by our own senses. I don't expect that we'll encounter any such radiation, but it's better to be safe than sterile."

"Agreed," said Jacko. "We're taking enough chances with the unknown already. I've just come back out of the Pen, and we're right on schedule. The first firing can take place at mid-day tomorrow."

"I'll be there," said Fritz. "I'm particularly interested in knowing what happens to the core which we leave in the pipe. If the Dark is true radiation-type phenomena, there won't be any core material. But if it's something else, we may have to think again."

The null-pressure suits obtained from Space Command were far more suitable for working under deep Pen conditions than the expeditionary clothing had been. Specifically designed for work on asteroids and similar bodies under a pressure dome but exposed to extremes of stellar heat and cold, the suits were the finest flexibilized radiation foils that had yet been devised. In the Pen, of course, no pressurized dome was needed, but the suits ensured that the searching fingers of contra-heat were no longer a danger or of major discomfort to the U.E. squad.

But the drag of the contra-momentum was not so easily avoided. Close to the wall of the Dark it exhibited an almost treacle-like resistance to movement which was common to both men and machines alike. The adaptations of technique needed for working in an environment possessing such a high quasi-viscosity were numerous, but the combined ingenuity of the Unorthodox Engineering squad was equal to the challenge. Somehow the impossible had been accomplished, and the structural components of Van

Noon's tunnel had been patiently sworn into place ready for the projected penetration of the Dark.

"Ready to fire?"

Jacko nodded. "First shot in thirty seconds."

They were watching the scene by the light of two large, continuously operating lasers which Courtney had managed to obtain. These were directed on the point where the leading end of the pipe was pressed hard against the Dark perimeter. The illumination, spread slightly by deliberate diffusion with mesh screens, was adequate despite the contra-radiation loss. The backscatter illumination was also quite useful around the working area, but was attenuated sharply and unnaturally with distance. The power for the lasers had to be derived from outside the Pen via cable, and the contra-electrical loss was such that two large generators were needed to drive sufficient energy in to keep the lasers in operation.

The first shot was fired. The sound of the explosion was incredibly muted, and the tongue of flame from the reaction chamber was quickly quenched and drained. Van Noon examined the junction between the pipe and the Dark.

"I think it's working, Jacko. Only millimetres so far, but it's definitely going in. Keep firing rapidly but erratically. Let me know when you're in about a metre. Then I want to go down inside the pipe and see if any sort of core is left."

By reason of good organization on Jacko's part they had penetrated a metre by late afternoon. Then the gun chamber was removed to allow access to the free end of the pipe. Van Noon had a line measured to a pipe's length minus one metre, and one end he left clamped to the free end of the pipe while he took the rest of the line inside to give him an indication of his position. Ten minutes later he came out jubilant.

"No core material, Jacko. The pipe is clear to the very

end, and then the Dark begins again. That means we've got a metre of clear tunnel already and no complications so far. Now I want firings to continue right round the clock, as close-spaced as possible without setting up a standard repetition rate. If you scatter the charges round the area a bit so that each has to be fetched from a slightly different distance, that should be sufficient. But I want the depth of penetration per shot carefully watched, and if it varies very much from the existing rate, cease firing and let me know."

It took forty hours to drive the first length of pipe into the Dark. By this time a second length had been added to the first and there were indications that the depth of penetration per shot was increasing. The second was driven home in twenty-five hours, partly due to the decreasing resistance it encountered, and partly due to the increasing proficiency of the shot-firers.

The third pipe was inserted in seventeen hours, and the fourth, in twelve. The time for subsequent pipes decreased in rough proportion. The tenth went half way, and then the indications were that no great resistance was being offered to it by the Dark since the assembly of pipes now moved forward the full theoretical distance per shot that they would have moved in the Pen itself. Jacko brought his charts to Van Noon.

"I think we're through, Fritz. These seem to show that the Dark is a relatively thin-wall phenomenon with its effects decreasing with depth of penetration and reaching virtually zero at about ninety-five metres. God alone knows what's at the other end."

"Take the gun chamber off, Jacko, but be careful in case something unexpected comes out of the pipe. If nothing happens in half an hour then I'm going through to have a look."

Nothing did happen. The end of the pipe protruding from the Dark remained empty, silent and cold; and there

was no way of telling what lay at the far end. A laser directed down the pipe returned nothing but light-scatter from walls and motes of dust. The only factor of note was a strong current of air entering the pipe as though to equalize some unexplained deficiency in pressure.

Finally Van Noon hoisted the radiation trolley into the pipe and followed it in.

"I'm going down a bit, Jacko, for a preliminary survey. Stand by with some weapons in case I come out fast with something after me."

"Nothing doing!" said Jacko. "If you're going down that pipe, then I'm coming too."

"That's what I hoped you'd say," said Fritz. "Let's get on with it. The situation won't improve itself by waiting."

He crawled into the pipe. With some misgivings, Jacko followed him in. Ahead of Fritz the radiation trolley clattered on the iron and raised a multitude of clamorous echoes which engulfed them in a tide of sound. Inside the pipe the contra-sound attenuation apparently did not operate to anything like the same degree as that encountered in the Pen. The radiation monitor gave no indication of any increase in rate above the slow background count, and they considered it safe to continue.

Occasionally Van Noon stopped and let the echoes die, but nothing else disturbed the silence except their own breathing and their own awkward movements in the confines of the pipe. Then after what seemed an eternity of crawling the clatter of the trolley ceased again and Van Noon stopped and half twisted himself to look back.

"Jacko," he said urgently, "think very carefully. Are you absolutely sure how many lengths of pipe we drove into the Dark?"

"A ruddy fine time to be concerned about the economics of the project."

"Hang the economics! Are you sure?"

"Certainly. Ten in all. Why?"

"I've been counting the joins. I'm now in the twelfth pipe, that's why."

"Don't make jokes like that, Fritz. You'll give me heart failure."

"I wasn't joking. The casters on the trolley drop into the flange gap at every join, and I have to ease them over. That's what made me start counting how many joins I'd passed."

"So you're now in the twelfth pipe out of the original ten," said Jacko, still not fully convinced. "That's quite a trick! How do you explain it, Fritz?"

"Contra-iron pipe," said Van Noon. "Lord! I thought it was a joke when Courtney suggested that they stopped a projectile with a contra projectile. But it appears it wasn't. They do just that. They tried to stop our pipe with a length of contra-iron pipe so precisely similar that I'd not have noticed the difference had I not been counting. What type of creatures could do that, Jacko—almost instantaneously?"

"I don't know," said Jacko. "But I'm afraid of them."

"You and me both. To work a trick like that must demand a technology centuries ahead of ours. But even so, I've a feeling we've got them worried."

"Why's that?"

"Because if they were still operating at full efficiency there's something we'd logically have met in this pipe before now—a contra-radiation monitoring trolley pushed by a contra Fritz Van Noon."

"We're way out of our depth, Fritz," said Jacko finally. "Are you still going on?"

"If you're still following."

"I'm still behind you, but I'm darned if I know why. I've followed you into some crazy situations before, but this has the lot beaten."

They moved on, the roar of the trolley casters echoing

and reverberating around them and occasionally stopping as Fritz eased the little wheels over a flange gap.

"Just entering pipe nineteen," said Van Noon finally. "If they provided as many as we did then there's only one to go."

"See anything yet?"

"Not an atom."

"I was just thinking, Fritz. It'd be a neat trick if they'd connected an infinity of pipes together. We could go on crawling through here till Judgment Day."

"Good point, Jacko. We'll reconsider the position when we get to the end of number twenty."

Again the trolley roared and stopped.

"Just entering pipe twenty," said Van Noon.

"Let's get it over with," said Jacko. "I feel like a godevil working overtime."

"Right. This is it!"

The trolley was moving slowly now, with Fritz concentrating on every centimetre of its progress, using the feel of the iron instead of eyes. There was no way to measure distance in the darkness. The only way was to crawl and to hope that one remembered the feeling of crawling a length of pipe. Then a sudden cessation of noise, with the echoes slowly sinking around them.

"End of pipe," said Van Noon. "But there's no resistance. The trolley is half way out of the end but I still can't see a thing. I'm going to let the trolley go and see what happens."

There was a brief scrape of metal on metal, and the thump of something on the pipe.

"It fell down," said Van Noon, "but not very far. I can still feel it with my hand. And something else . . . There's no contra-momentum out here. I can move quite freely. It isn't even very cold. It must mean we're well inside the wall of the Dark. I wonder if the torch will work."

The torch did work. In the darkness the light touched the

interior of the pipe with an intensity that was momentarily dazzling. Projected outwards, the beam was clearly visible but it contacted nothing that reflected except the wet, brown stones of the earth, and the radiation trolley fallen on its side. Ostensibly they were looking into night, bare and empty, but Fritz was not convinced.

"This isn't darkness," said Van Noon. "It's more like veils of darkness . . . thin layers of contra-light. See how the torch beam falls off in discrete quanta. I'm going out there, Jacko, to see if I can make head or tail of this. You stay by the pipe with a torch ready to guide me back. I'd very much like to find out who or what it was that put ten pipes on the end of ours."

"And I'm going to wish you luck," Jacko said. "I'm not at all sure I want to know."

Van Noon dropped to the ground. The soil underfoot was an obvious continuation of the old town terrain. His torch illuminated the stony earth for many metres in front of him, but it was useless when directed horizontally in any direction because of the apparent lack of anything to reflect the light.

But he was right in his observation that the intensity of the light was stepped-down by curtaining veils of something. As he approached a veil he could see a distinct drop in the brightness of the beam as it was intercepted by something dark and nebulous. He reached the veil and touched it, curiously. His fingers encountered nothing, and he walked through it without sensation. Looking back, he was glad still to be able to see the light from Jacko's torch, but he knew that if he passed through many veils even that would be lost to him.

But the situation changed without warning. The fifth veil was not insubstantial at all. It was a film of something like dark, thin-blown glass, and he shattered it with his torch because he had not known of its solidity. And as it shattered, light from beyond spilled out through the broken

edges and he had the briefest glimpse of the scene of gold-hazed wonder . . . and then the air exploded in his face.

And even the explosion was unreal. The blast caught him not from in front but from behind and above, moving towards the explosion rather than from it. It tumbled him forward and pinned his body to the ground with a great pressure. Desperately he fought to raise his neck and shoulders for a further glimpse of the creatures who lived in their sanctuary deep inside the hollow Dark. He wanted a better look at the godlike machines they controlled, now rising high like gossamer and congregating in the golden light as they swept magnificently upwards almost faster than the eye could follow. But a sheet of flame crackled and tore across the vastness of the area and whipped high in an angry, explosive tide.

A shockfront of pressure tore him from the ground, then dropped him cruelly. Despite the hurt he fought to retain consciousness and turn and watch the exodus of the gods. But the forces acting on him were too great. Instead he was swamped by darkness.

His next impression was that of Courtney's face and the sense of lapsed hours. He felt bruised and shaken, but not seriously hurt. He was lying in the open, and the Ithican sky above was broadly trailed with the colours of the sunset.

Courtney came up and put a folded coat beneath his head and a blanket over his body.

"Take it easy, Fritz. There's a doctor on his way."

Van Noon smiled wanly. He tried to sit up, then thought better of it. "Is this where the Dark was, or did you get me out."

Courtney sat down beside him. "The Dark's gone, Fritz. I don't know what you did, but you certainly made a good job of it. The whole darn thing imploded. It was a fantastic sight. The Dark and the Pen drew up together, then spiral-

ized like a whirlwind. There was a blast which broke every window in New Bethlem . . . and then the whole complex just disappeared."

"I know what did it," said Van Noon. "Our atmosphere reacted with theirs with a sort of mutual destructiveness. It was the total reaction of mass with mass—complete consumption of both and no by-product. It was our tunnel let the air through, and I broke the last seal by accident. And once the reaction started, nothing could stop it."

"So it was contra-terrene!" said Courtney.

"Deep inside, yes. And I'd guess that the purpose of the Dark was to act as a form of barrier against the contra world outside—an insulator separating the opposed atomic conditions. They must have tried to maintain it against penetration by every trick they knew. But what damned them was a simple slip of logic. They stopped a hollow object with a hollow object . . . and forgot the hole inside. But even so, we were lucky to get through."

"Lucky?"

"Yes," said Fritz. "We were operating on the wrong principle. There was no detection, analysis, synthesis reaction involved. There didn't need to be, not the way they did it."

"I don't follow, Fritz."

"I missed the point myself at first, but there's only one logical answer to the detection and negation of any phenomena applied anywhere at any time. . . . They did it with mirrors."

"Mirrors?"

"Yes. Not ordinary mirrors, of course, but using a reflecting principle capable of producing the exact and true physical inverse of whatever comes into its field—a mirror that works not only with light but over the entire region of physical and force phenomena, including matter itself."

"My God!" said Courtney. "It's a fascinating concept."

"I'd give anything to know the mechanics of it," said Van Noon. "The reflector wasn't a simple plane, it was a three-dimensional cavity about ninety metres deep between the inner and outer walls. And somehow in that space were reproduced contra-physical objects rather than mere images. And in our innocence we had the temerity to bore right through the 'glass' to the back."

"That's where you have me puzzled by this mirror hypothesis, Fritz. It doesn't seem to fit the facts. Your breakthrough was dependent on the assumed detection-analysis-synthesis trinity, and it worked. But the theory assumed a delay time was inherent. But a mirror has no time-lag. Its returned image is instantaneous."

"That's not true," objected Van Noon. "The image returned by a mirror is never instantaneous. Light travels from the object to the glass at a finite velocity, and through the glass at a different but also finite velocity. So the image returned to the object is always delayed in time by just twice the time it takes light to reach the reflector. We were lucky in that in their contra mirror the effect was even more pronounced for the type of phenomenon in which we were interested."

Courtney absorbed this in silence for a moment or two. Then: "What put you on to the idea, Fritz?"

"Primarily your point about their power output having to match the total power input from all sources. It seemed improbable they would have chosen such a dynamic and wasteful method of maintaining a long-term defence. But a reflection principle has no such disadvantage. A mirror returns only when it receives. It needs no power to return the image. And when I got into the cavity and found nothing there but the image-iron pipes by which we'd just arrived, I knew that reflection was the only answer. But like a damn fool I went and blundered through the 'silvering' on the back of this mirror."

He leaned back momentarily and closed his eyes, trying

to recapture an image in his own head. "What happened to *them*, Maxwell? Did they get away?"

Courtney turned his head to look at the sunset.

"No. They didn't make it, Fritz. They reached the stratosphere in those machines of theirs, but then they exploded. Thank God the power release was too high to do much damage!"

"It's a pity," said Fritz. "I'd sooner have got to know them than have destroyed them. We could have learnt an awful lot from people who could build mirrors like that."

"Had they been inclined to teach," said Courtney, "but in two hundred years they never attempted even to make a contact. I think that they were so far ahead of us that we were merely as ants to them."

Van Noon sat up painfully and looked around. "By the way, what happened to Jacko?"

"He's a little bruised and dazed, but nothing serious. Apparently the implosive blast shot him out of the pipe like a cork out of a bottle. He swears you did it on purpose."

"I saw them go," said Van Noon, "and they were like golden gods flying back to Olympus. I would never have done a thing like that on purpose. Do you suppose we'll ever know why they were here?"

"I doubt it," said Courtney. "And even if they'd tried to tell us, I doubt our capacity to have understood. Try explaining the uses and construction of a Dewar flask to an ant—and see who gets tired first."

## SPACEMEN LIVE FOREVER

by

GERALD W. PAGE

*On the long voyage between the stars, the passengers slept indefinitely in suspended animation, tended only by two living crewmen—but they were immortals except for accidental death, and when that came to one the other was faced with loneliness or awakening a sleeper . . .*



## SPACEMEN LIVE FOREVER

IN a tank on the fourth passenger tier, in the fiftieth bank of passenger tanks, there was a girl whose oval face was serenely calm. Her eyes were closed as if she were in natural relaxed sleep and her dark hair, greenish brown in the nutrient solution, floated about her face like a dark halo. She was only one of many girls aboard the ship, only one of many Torman Graylight had cared for in the many voyages he had undertaken in his unnaturally long life, but there was something special about this girl and it was not the perfection of her body, pale green in the tank fluid, nor the beauty of her face. He admitted to himself readily that there were girls as beautiful and even more beautiful aboard this ship. Perhaps it was the calmness of her expression. Perhaps it was that and the loneliness of a month with no human companionship other than the tiers and rows of sleeping passengers. Loneliness. That was it.

The only other spaceman aboard the *Leone* was a man named Kelly—a man who was cheerful, even witty, where Graylight was dour. Technically, Graylight was first officer and Kelly second, but in reality they were equals. Spacemen live forever and that sets them apart from others—but closer together. The men who have homes on planets do not live forever: planets are crowded and immortality is no blessing on a world where there is no room to stand. But the voyages between stars take decades and because the men who fly the ships must remain awake during voyages that are longer than a normal lifetime, they are given lifetimes much longer than normal. Their passengers sleep, unaware of the passing of years or decades or even centuries while the spacemen tend and watch over them.

It had been several weeks since Graylight had seen Kelly and he decided to seek him out. The ship was large and two men could work in it, checking out the passengers and the various instruments and controls, without ever wandering into each other's half of the ship. It would be nice to see Kelly again. Graylight was determined to suggest that they trade halves of the ship. It was months since Graylight worked in the other part of the ship and the change would be welcome, the faces seem as new as any faces could. That would be a welcome change, thought Torman Graylight.

When his work period was over, he went to find Kelly. The huge ship was honeycombed with corridors and cabins and storage tiers, but after inspection hours Kelly would be in one of the wardrooms, probably drinking or reading a book reel.

But Kelly was in none of the wardrooms. Graylight checked them one by one but did not find Kelly. Graylight shrugged and poured himself a drink in the weak gravity that was maintained aboard the ship for the health and comfort of its crew and passengers. Graylight watched the glass fill up with an almost hypnotized interest and then he drank slowly without worry.

Hours passed but Kelly did not come.

That meant nothing. Time could easily be forgotten by anyone who has so much of it. Possibly one of those rare problems had arisen in Kelly's part of the ship, a welcome interruption to occupy a spaceman's mind for a few hours or days. It was not necessarily alarming that a man did not show up when time and schedules meant nothing to him. The ship was large, the voyage long. A whim could alter habits in space.

But in the end, loneliness and the thought that whatever detained Kelly might provide interest for Graylight as well, made the spaceman go to the nearest communication room and call Kelly's name over the public address shipwide

hook-up—but Kelly did not answer. Now Graylight had reason to be worried. He went to investigate.

He found Kelly in a long corridor that curved just inside the hull of the ship. At first he did not know for sure that he had located his colleague—but the sickening suspicion that he had, haunted him. He saw only that plating in the inboard bulkhead had given way. There was a rubble of metal sheets and shreds and one heavy bracing girder on the corridor deck. Rivets had snapped and bulkhead plates that were still in place next to the ones that gave way were buckled and torn. Graylight found Kelly under the rubble, crushed by the heavy plates, his skull smashed by the girder. He was dead and Graylight's first reaction was to the absurdity and irony of a dead immortal.

But of course, the word "immortal" itself was an irony : the potential to live forever was there in the treated person—but the potential only, not a guarantee. No matter where a man goes, sooner or later he will be visited by accident. Not even the core of a planet is safe, for planets die and suns erupt or worlds collide. Eventually the dust motes of space will wear away the largest of worlds. The process called immortality was merely the process that gave men longer life. How long, no one knew for no one had yet lived long enough to know, but it could not be forever because sooner or later there would be an accident. An earthquake or a meteor or a war. All immortals died violently—though they might escape violence for centuries.

Graylight welcomed the fact that there were now things to be done. Loneliness forgotten, he carefully wrapped the body of his fellow spaceman in black cloth and consigned it to space to become a temporary satellite of the ship, eventually becoming a meteorite burning out in some planet's atmosphere. Then he busied himself with repairs and after that there was the rest of the ship to be checked as a safety precaution against this sort of accident happen-

ing again. When the examining was done, there was the entire ship to be serviced—not just half.

Months passed—months of routine work that made time pass. It was Graylight's habit, as it always had been, to talk to his passengers. That helped some. He was talking to himself, of course, giving himself assurance where he needed it; and the comfort of a voice, the solace of his own thoughts—and the illusion that he was not lonely. But comfort, solace, and illusion are things that die.

Finally he found himself on the fourth tier and at the fiftieth bank of passengers. He remembered a girl whose face impressed him and whose face had been a shadowy part of his memory every day since first he saw it.

She was as he remembered her. Her dark billowing mass of hair floated brown green about her face. Her closed eyes were serene and quiet. Graylight marvelled as he studied her oval face, not beautiful yet most attractive, even pretty. That was what he marvelled at: the wonder that he could be so affected by a woman's face, knowing that it was not a truly beautiful face. It seemed to him standing there, that he was learning about new depths of his own self—his own capacities.

After many minutes, he began talking to her. And he realized his talk presaged madness.

The realization came to him as if from nowhere. He stopped talking in midsentence and stared, mouth open, at the girl in the tank, his mind active. *Six years*, a voice inside him said. *Six years*.

No one could take absolute loneliness for that long—not with these sleeping passengers to tantalize him. So he did the only thing he could to correct the situation—and even as he did it, a part of him knew that it was madness.

Moments later the girl's body lay drying on a table in an emergency revival room.

Graylight had acted without thought and as he watched her begin to revive, he became suddenly very scared.

The girl was breathing normally within minutes, her metabolism rapidly adjusting. She would awaken shortly and he would have to tell her something. He did not know her name, her home planet, her destination or what she was like—although that already-mad part of his mind told him he did know what she would be like. He would need a story to tell her. How could he tell her the truth? That he had revived her so that she might share six years of loneliness with him?

He learned her name from the information plaque attached to the nutrient tank she was in. She was Gloriana Dalrone of Earth, headed for Paura, the ultimate destination of the *Leone*. When she entered the tanks she was twenty. In suspended animation, she would be a biological twenty when she arrived at Paura. But now she would be twenty-six.

And Graylight would be four-hundred-and-how-many years old?

It was worse than madness, reviving this girl, Graylight realized. Earth was a crowded planet with a population of billions. Room was a precious thing on Earth and because of the crowded conditions the process of longevity was forbidden. Immortality did not appeal to people on a world where the death of a person might mean more room and privileges for someone else. It was a recognized necessity for spacemen, but it set them apart and made them pariahs on a world like Earth. A man who can live forever is a menace on a world crowded with people.

So she would hate him. . . .

If he could, if the facilities were available to him, Graylight would have put her back in suspended animation. But those facilities were not available. There was nothing he could do about it now but lie.

He returned to the table she was on and found her awake. He had covered her with a light sheet. She was sitting up, holding the sheet up to her throat, staring at him

with large, frightened eyes. Then the fear seemed to melt from her face and she relaxed visibly. As if with relief, she breathed deeply. "We've arrived, haven't we? I'd forgotten about the trip. I was actually frightened by this room. When may I go aground?"

Torman Graylight started to speak but the words caught in his throat.

"Speak up," she said. "When may I go aground?"

"In six years," Graylight said.

The girl regarded him oddly, as if uncertain of his sanity

"When?" she asked.

"In six years," Graylight repeated.

The girl was stunned. So stunned she seemed frozen. She let go of the sheet and it almost slid down before she remembered and clutched at it.

"It was an accident," Graylight said, gathering his senses.

"That is, it was unforeseen by the doctors. A mistake. A——"

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"You couldn't stay in the tank," Graylight said. The words came quickly; the lie was forming itself with surprising ease. "I check the tanks regularly and instruments monitor them constantly. You were developing an allergy to the nutrient solution. Had you stayed in the tank you would have had a reaction in a few months' time. Probably a fatal reaction. I had to——"

"Did you say six years? Six years until we reach Paura?"

"Yes."

"And the return trip? Must I stay awake during that?"

"If you have an allergy to the nutrient tanks you cannot use them," he said fumblingly. "Yes, your return would be . . . would have to be——"

"You should have left me in there," she said with sudden vehemence. She waited as if she expected an answer. When he gave none, she went on. "Don't you see what you've

done? How could you take the responsibility? Why?"

"You'll need your luggage," he said. "Your clothes. I'll get them from the hold. It will take a few minutes."

He turned and left.

It was necessary to check the cargo reference file to locate the luggage. When he finally located hers, there was too much to bring on one trip without the sort of robot the ship was not supposed to need outside of port—and therefore did not carry. It was ridiculous that a person from a densely overpopulated world could have so much baggage. He selected one case that looked as if it might be a wardrobe and another one that was small enough to carry. When he returned to the revival room she did not seem to have moved.

"Those will do," she said in a small voice. Graylight left, so that she could dress. It was strange, this thing of morals and customs and simple human embarrassment. He had cared for her when she was nude and sleeping in the tank and he had handled her body as a doctor would in preparing her to be revived. Now that she was awake and under her own control, it was different. To Graylight the difference seemed more than one of custom for he knew of a hundred worlds that permitted nudity and license without embarrassment and he was more like a native of those worlds than he was of Earth, where he had been born. But he had to respect her feelings. It was the loneliness. It was the lie.

He went to the wardroom and fixed himself a drink. He sat for a long time, not touching or thinking about the liquid before him. Thoughts moved so swiftly through his numb mind that none of them really registered.

Presently she was standing in the doorway, wearing a simple light blue tunic, and to Graylight's surprise she smiled at him.

"You saved my life," she said, as if explaining. "I had no right to talk to you the way I did."

"Don't apologize," Graylight said.

"I forgot gratitude in favour of fear," she said, coming into the room. "How many spacemen are there aboard the ship?"

"Myself only," he said.

"I thought there were others."

"There are only the two of us awake aboard this ship," Graylight said.

"I see," the girl said hesitantly. "Then we must make an effort to get along with one another. Six years is a long time. What is your name?"

"Torman Graylight."

"Torman Graylight," she repeated. "I like that. My name is Gloriana Dalrone."

"I know," he replied. "The records . . . but you must be hungry. . . ."

She was, so Graylight prepared a meal. He used no robots or mechanical aids other than the stove and a device for opening cans, all of which seemed to fascinate Gloriana. It was quite primitive, but letting food thaw out to be cooked with heat and prepared personally took time and gave Graylight something to do. He and she ate in silence and he was aware how she watched him, studying his face with a strange sidelong way of glancing at him out of the corners of her eyes. Awake, her face was not so calm as it had been in the nutrient tank, but it was a lively, girlish face and there was still an enigmatic quality about it that Graylight was unable to identify.

"I'll have to learn to care for the ship and passengers," she said after the meal. "I'll have to keep busy so that time will pass. Don't you agree?"

"I agree," Graylight said. He had not considered the matter which made him aware of what a fool he was. "I'll teach you to care for passengers."

He left the room to find a place where he could be alone.

This thing he had done was foolish—more than he realized. He wondered how he could have done such a thing.

When he awoke, Graylight prepared a breakfast for two in the wardroom. Gloriana sat watching him, her face drawn and pale. Her hand was trembling as she took the plate he offered her. And she saw that he noticed.

She forced a laugh. "I'm sorry. It's just that I . . . well, I'm afraid. This room is so large. Back on Earth we don't have rooms this large with only two people in them. Even though my parents own a six-room apartment I'm used to swarms of people in the building. All this emptiness . . . not having crowds around me . . . it all scares me."

"I've seen it before," he said. "Earth people visit planets where there is room but they never get used to it. They seek out crowds. They huddle. It's a common thing."

The meal was finished in silence and Graylight spent the day showing her how to care for passengers. He taught her how to read the telltales, how to set controls and how to recognize a problem and correct it. She was an apt pupil, eager to learn, anxious to do well. Her questions were intelligent and it pleased Graylight to find a subject for conversation that did not cause them embarrassment. Almost continuously he thought about what he had done to her and how she would react when she learned the truth—as she would, sooner or later. The doctors at Paura would not be fooled as she was with this story of an allergy. She would learn to hate Torman Graylight.

Days followed and a routine developed. Gloriana learned and gradually she conquered her fear of being in a place where there was such a sinful lot of precious, unused room.

Gradually Graylight stopped worrying about the lie and gradually the two of them found talk easier. She talked of Earth or her parents and sisters who were still in sleep tanks; and sometimes she told him about herself.

She talked about her childhood on the crowded Earth;

how her family and she were going to Paura to live. Her father owned a holding there. She dreamed about what Paura would be like and she told these dreams to Graylight. Dreams of a world where a person could have children without worrying if there was room; without needing governmental permission. She dreamed of a fertile, paradise world. Graylight withheld the truth from her that Paura was a bleak, barren world where it was necessary to work constantly just to stay alive. He didn't have the heart and her dreams were beautiful.

He talked frequently about himself, about his centuries in space; his voyages, his childhood on Earth before he became a spaceman. She listened avidly, without any indication of disgust on her face. She was slowly getting used to him.

At the end of half a year, Gloriana was happy once more.

Thinking back, Graylight knew that her happiness had grown steadily. Gradually she ceased tending passengers to merely stay busy and began doing it because she enjoyed it. She came to like Graylight as well, but Graylight still was haunted by the ghost of what he had done.

One night, after the meal was finished, Graylight prepared to leave the wardroom. The meal had been silent because something seemed to bother Gloriana. The exuberance of the past several weeks were gone and she was fretful and worried. Graylight decided she missed her friends and home. As he moved to leave the room, she stopped him.

"Do you have to leave?" she asked. "We've been alone on this ship for a long time."

"There are thousands aboard this ship."

"They aren't company. Except for my parents, I know none of them. I have no feelings for them as I do for you."

"It isn't right," Graylight said. But he was uncertain that it was wrong.

"It is right," she said insistently. "I love you now. It's happened in the past months we've spent together. I want you to ask me to marry you."

For a moment he was puzzled; then he recalled that Earth still maintained the old tradition, unlike most worlds.

"I can't," he said simply, and turned away.

For a month or more he wandered the ship, trying to reconcile his guilt and his desires. His mind was a jumble of memories about his crime and about Gloriana. His work was routine and he performed it easily, occupying his hands but not his mind.

At the end of the month he searched for her, and when he found her, he told her the truth.

For a moment she was silent. Then she said, "And you did this because you love me?"

"No," Graylight said. "I did it because I was alone and lonely. I had no reason more than that, Gloriana."

"I've been alone and lonely for a month," said Gloriana. "Before that I was lonely but not alone. I think I understand your feelings."

"And you condemn me for it."

"No."

"But why not?" Graylight asked. "What I did was reprehensible. You should condemn me."

"I do not," she said. "I want you to ask me to marry you."

Graylight, who was not a man who understood his own emotions very well, was now more confused, more at a loss, than before. "It can't be," he said. "I'm a spaceman. I will live for centuries yet, biologically remaining the same apparent age I seem now. You——"

But he could not bring himself to finish the sentence.

So she finished it for him. "I will age. I'll wrinkle and dry up, become grey and feeble, lose my hearing and eyesight. I will grow old. Is that it?"

"I don't want to watch you age while I remain as I am," said Graylight.

"Is there a way to undo the process of longevity?"

"There is violent death."

"Then if you cannot join me," Gloriana said, "I must join you."

For a moment Graylight could not speak. Surely she did not realize the sacrifice she would be making.

He found his voice and said, "There are ways, but I can't let you. It is against the laws of Earth. You'd be hounded through the entire galaxy and when you were caught you would be imprisoned in a metal sphere set adrift in space. You would have neither food nor air. You would feel the pains of hunger and air starvation but you would not die. After centuries your prison might be struck by a meteor or might fall into a star, but the years prior to that would be more than I can let you risk."

"There's no other way," she said.

But Graylight argued, telling her of the certainty of punishment. And in the end, Graylight gave in to her.

He took her into a small room, fitted for surgical and bio-formative operations. For a moment he stood, his hand lightly on her arm, and stared about at the array of glistening plastic and metal and glass that were the instruments of this room and he thought of how those machines were like badges of the trust that had been given to him. Jointly to him and to Kelly.

Yes, jointly, that was how the trust was given. That made a difference.

There was no trust in him alone. He was betraying no one.

He directed Gloriana to an operating table in the centre of the room where he administered the anaesthetic to her. As soon as she was peacefully asleep, he gave himself a drug to control the trembling of his own hands.

The operation took less than an hour.

He waited by her side after it was over, until her eyelids flickered and her eyes opened. Her face grimaced against the light as it touched her eyes. With a trembling voice, she asked, "Is it over?"

"It is over," Graylight said. "It is over and done with and we are—alike. The same. More closely bound together than by any marriage ceremony, Gloriana."

She looked up at him and smiled, whether tenderly or weakly he could not say.

"Now," Graylight said, "we have the problem of escaping the law."

"There are worlds in the galaxy which Earth does not control."

"There are no worlds where Earth's money cannot reach. Even the deserted ones."

"But there must be some place in the galaxy. There must be a world we can go to."

"You must face this one fact," said Graylight, "or all we've done is in vain. There is no world. Not one in this galaxy where we can hope to escape the reach of Earth. To try hiding on any planet is hopeless."

"No. We mustn't give up hope," she said. She sat up and looked at him with large, frightened eyes. She reached for him and pressed her face against his chest and he knew that she was crying.

He took her hand and said, "Come with me, Gloriana."

She stopped crying and stared up at him, her eyes still frightened.

"You have the strength. Come with me, Gloriana."

He led her to the control room and touched a panel so that the wall before them became transparent and the vast emptiness of space outside the ship could be seen.

"What do you see, Gloriana?"

"Graylight, I don't understand."

"Answer me. What do you see?"

Gloriana looked at the view wall. There was a puzzled

frown on her brow. "I see stars," she said. "Thousands of stars, glowing brightly."

"Yes," Graylight answered. "That is part of what you see. And besides stars? Between them?"

The frown deepened. "Why, blackness. Space. Emptiness."

Graylight said nothing. He watched the frown slowly vanish from her face as the answer—the only answer—came to her.

"There is no other way, is there? I'd never have thought of it."

Graylight said nothing.

"But what of the others? The sleepers?" asked Gloriana. "They were headed for so many planets. Surely it isn't right to take them with us."

"There is no place we can unload them. Besides, the worlds they are bound for are harsh, dismal worlds. Perhaps in several thousand years we can find them another world. One where they can build a happier life. We will have to see."

He stared at the stars, then added, "I hope you don't hate me for this. There just isn't any other way."

Gloriana tightened her grip on his hand.

The ship sped on in space, heading for the edge of the galaxy and the galaxy beyond. In thousands of years it might cross the vast gulf between the two galaxies. Eventually Graylight and Gloriana might set foot on another planet. Or they might keep going until finally an accident caught up to them. That was Graylight's answer. And the only answer.

Because spacemen live forever.

## THE FINAL SOLUTION

by

R. W. MACKELWORTH

*When Master Race meets Master Race in the battle for supremacy, there can only be one victor—to save unnecessary bloodshed, however, why not match the adversaries with a series of fitness tests?*



## THE FINAL SOLUTION

WHEN it is dark they will come for me.

I will let them take me. Not that I could escape, because out there in the quiet afternoon they are waiting for me. Anyway, it is all my fault.

Have you ever noticed that when you are at fault, however much you try to shift the blame, you know deep inside you ought to let the rest punish the fault? Well, perhaps not—unless you are one of my people.

Our tradition is very old. We bend towards a military, very exacting cult. We number ourselves and give ourselves ranks. We wear uniforms whenever we can. We speak with one voice.

What we want is purity.

I thought I had found the essence of that purity when I ordered a ship to attack The Rose World. It's a big world, far away on the edge of the galaxy, but it had never been explored or exploited. I had this intuitive feeling, you see, that it would test our metal, that it might produce the ultimate goal we wanted. After all, what was the use of having the finest military machine in the width and breadth of space unless it was used?

There was no resistance worth the name.

That was my first shock. The planet had a reputation for soldierly honour. Yet, they welcomed our invasion force as if it was all they had ever wished for.

Just as we had high expectations of them, it seemed, they had high expectations of us. Our reputation had gone before us and what they had heard they liked. The planet, which had vanquished the explorer, the trader, and the priest, threw itself into the arms of the most rapacious,

double dealing, cynically puritanical attacker of them all. They not only bent their necks beneath the heel, they did it gladly. They not only surrendered their considerable power to the most vicious scheme of empire ever let loose, they asked to join.

They wanted to become part of us.

We have a certain spartan tradition as far as citizenship is concerned. Every youth has to prove himself, or herself . . . we aren't particular about the sexes, and having survived the initiation to maintain the standard. If one wishes to become a master race one has to put guns before butter and in this we have borne history out, along with the bodies.

The people of The Rose World could do no less.

We were flattered by their desire to join us. It fitted into my own little fantasy. Some races search the planets for God. Some search for wealth. Some do it for glory. One or two do it for fun . . . they are mad. We were looking for a fulfilment of a dream, the end to which every dictatorship has headed. We wanted to find a race which had perfected the master man: a living proof of what the spirit of conquest could produce, an evidence for the power of no compromise, a hard, clean purity in human shape.

They sent us two representatives.

These two, we were to put through every test. I arranged the publicity, better known as propaganda, so that every trader, priest, liberal politician and backslider in the galaxy could see where we were heading, and that we deserved the name of man's ultimate destiny. I wanted them to see that the jackboot was a decent way of life because of what it produced. Nothing works like an independent witness, after all.

The representatives were shown into my office.

Naturally, they came as something of a shock. I should have expected to be shocked by the fiercest killers in the universe, our closest cousins in culture, whose spirit, let's

confess it, had developed far beyond ours. Nevertheless, the dark green, satanic faces and the upswept yellow hair, neatly wound into a bun around a clean, white bone, did surprise me.

The biggest of the pair, Slan, was six inches taller than me. His body rippled with muscles and sword cuts. His black rimmed eyes were wickedly threatening. He stood up like a Prussian guard. He was so racially pure the best families of The Rose World sent their daughters to him for stud.

I saluted him with pride.

I was only an Under State Leader after all.

He saluted me and his eyes lingered over-long, I thought, on the fleshy parts of my body. I had a feeling that I hadn't quite measured up.

Eventually, he condescended to speak.

"You will confer with my aide. When I meet a man worthy of my attention I will talk to him. Until then I will have nothing more to say. Understand?"

I understood.

The taut scream which had punctuated his question had all the true hallmarks of a real leader. Slan was a creature to be obeyed. By contrast his assistant, Charlock, was friendly. I sensed he was that rare commodity, a man of exactly my own rank. We were a near pair.

We saluted at the same instant.

"An honour," he muttered.

"My pleasure," I replied.

We do, of course, have some regulators which assist our self discipline. It was these regulators which Slan and Charlock had to master before we could go farther, before we could admit them as equals. I had been ordered to put them through a number of tests and, if they passed, the Leader himself would give them citizenship. He would put around their necks the chain with its bright gold cross which was the ultimate mark of caste.

It's a simple device. One better than "thought police" or the thumbscrew, and all the other brave tries of previous cultures with the same mind as our own. It was highly scientific. It kept its own tally of thought and action and stored each and every inclination in its infinitely tiny cells. As long as the wearer fulfilled his obligations he was all right. If he deviated . . . it blew his head off.

It took lots of training to wear it.

I explained it all to Charlock. He seemed impressed.

"Our methods are very similar. Only the best survive them." He smiled his gruesome smile. "That was why we were so delighted to meet your race. It seemed an excellent opportunity to compare notes . . . to find out who is the best." His smile was a leer and one of his eyelids drooped into a travesty of a wink.

"Today we will take the preliminary test. Quite simple: cold and heat. Then we will go to the rally to listen to the Leader speak. Tomorrow we will take the next order of tests: pressure and endurance. Then we will return to my office to listen to a resumé of the Leader's speech on the video tape."

"What do we do for entertainment?"

For a moment I thought he was being humorous—a crippling disability. But he wasn't. His mind worked just like ours.

"There is a Wagner recital or patriotic songs in the Guard's mess or, if you wish for another kind of satisfaction, there is . . ."

He raised his hand to stop me. "Until we have settled the matter of the tests I would not want to risk intimacy with any of your women."

His ethics were gratifying. First, he wanted to prove himself worthy. I saluted him. "That is the right attitude, Charlock. Please forgive my error of judgment."

"Yes," he said very quietly, "they might not be worthy of me. That would be unforgivable."

It was a terrible thing to hear. On the other hand I had to admit his logic. There could only be one master race—even in the whole galaxy. When Slan met our Leader it would be a comparison. Unless, by some rare chance, they were of the same inherent rank only one would be able to be master. Hadn't I brought these two across space for just that confrontation so that the meeting would give us a new inspiration?

If Slan were the better, wasn't he what we wanted to be? Perhaps we would find out, through him, the final destination for which we were headed. Not looking back, like the philosophers at Socrates, but forward at the future . . . at an ideal of man the victor. If his race had reached this peak then we knew our race could also. Even if our Leader had to acknowledge Slan a better man. It would be worth it.

The first tests were fairly high up the scale of achievement. We couldn't insult our guests by starting them at kindergarten level.

Slan and Charlock entered the refrigeration room with me. The principle was simple. They dropped the temperature until the men inside the room had had enough. A man could leave voluntarily. All he had to do was walk out or be carried out, but his time of leaving was noted and on that he was graded.

We didn't hear the Leader's speech.

For hours the temperature was edged down. We sat naked, as degree after degree of cold frosted our skin and made clear icicles about our nose and mouth. I drew into myself as I had been trained. I could hear the inner movements of my body as each internal function worked then slowed down to the point of hibernation. I saw nothing, I heard nothing, but what was in my body and the spiral of my mind. Ring by ring I descended the spiral into the state of non-being.

They took me out and, a second or so later, Charlock.

My grading had shot up to a place I had hardly dreamt could exist. It was barely below that of the Leader himself.

It was another hour before Slan would permit them to take him out. He should have been dead. He was not only alive, he was alert. When he came out he walked like a snow king from a winter garden and he walked as if it was nothing.

"This," I thought, "will celebrate our cause around the whole universe. This is where our self-denial, our cult of perfection will take us."

I insisted on going into the heat room with him and Slan. If I had to die then I would die a hero. My only wish was to die after Charlock and at the feet of the master: Slan.

I threw my being into the test with all the will I could muster. The heat rose and the sweat ran down my body until finally it was steam. I hardened the skin of my flesh until it was a radiant, shining armour and I took breath infinitely slowly to feed a heartbeat that hardly stirred. It was a power full of a curious intoxication which filled my imagination with fantasies of immortality. It was victory.

This time I was as good as the Leader.

Slan was a little better.

Charlock came out with him.

When they made the grading they had to take into account the fact that The Rose World was colder than ours.

The next day followed, on a night which had been a torment of racked pain for myself but which seemingly had given Slan nothing but sweet dreams. Charlock was a little jaded but rather superior. His grading was well above mine. Fortunately, neither Slan nor Charlock knew they were rated even above the Leader.

In the pressure chamber I did very well. I was much better than Charlock. I had been into space hundreds of times and I was acclimatized. All the same Slan endured. He survived pressures which would have flattened any

other man. He sat on in the pressure chamber as his face distorted like a rubber mask and his eyes protruded like small bubbles. Long after I had left he was there.

The same happened at the endurance test.

The test was the moment of truth. It was what we all worked for, from the day of our birth, to the day of manhood.

There was a high pole. It thrust into the sky. The test was as simple as the simplicity the pole seemed to suggest. A man stood on the three-inch cap on the top of the pole, and to do it he had to stand rigid without moving a muscle, like part of the pole itself. If he shifted a fraction he fell to his death.

From my high stand I saw the Leader watching.

His eyes were on Slan. Even from that height I thought I saw fear on his face. I was wrong. He was beyond fear.

The next day he would meet Slan face to face.

And Slan stayed on the pole until then.

The guards were proudly stationed on either side of the double doors to the Leader's room. Everywhere, his face stared down at us from the lifesize portraits about the walls. We hadn't made the same mistake as the old fascists. We didn't allow ourselves to believe that a nasty little creature with the power of persuasion could lead a nation of supermen. We demanded, and got, a superman to lead us who yet had the power of persuasion, the hypnotic eye, the sense of purpose. Him, we could cheer and know that our cheers went to a worthy man.

Slan had proved himself in the physical sense. He had to prove that mentally he was a better man than the Leader. He had to prove himself better emotionally. Slan had to sway crowds so they drank him in like a cool draught of heady wine.

I thought he could do it.

Then, different cultures have different ways.

The computers and the mathematicians, the policy makers and the experts in racial prediction, all said he was the far distant perspective. That what he did, with the Leader, would be the very precise point to which we were heading. They supported my thesis.

They were wrong too.

Or, perhaps they were right.

The logical trend can be taken to the point of the ridiculous where the distant lines intersect and then widen again into another reality. Go beyond the place where your eyes focus and you lose your goal in a haze of lost horizons.

Charlock was rude, I remember. He knew he was better than me. I thought he would be able to cut me down with his eyes, to enthrall me with his voice, now he had the confidence of his victory. Instead, he watched me closely and he dribbled.

"When Slan comes out you will receive your gold cross," I said, looking down at the small swastika hanging from my own neck. "All your race will belong to the new order. You will add to its stature. Slan is the perfect new man. He will meet our Leader in a fair contest of wills and come through those doors full of the confidence of his victory."

Charlock belched.

Now, I know the truth and I can see dimly why the rest of the universe laughed its head off. I can see the great structure of our culture falling into ruin. Thinking in this way I wonder why the cross hasn't blown my head off. As I've already said it might be a matter of logic and nothing more. The primitives thought rather like us, that a defeated enemy's strength could be absorbed into the body of his conqueror. We thought in the same way really, though it was really a matter of mind, while the primitives were much more practical. Compromise, if you like, had held us back from the full implications of our philosophy. Nation devouring nation and taking its power and strength into the body corporate, there we stopped.

Slan's race were less complicated.

It wasn't a matter of will over will in the end.

When he came out of the room he came alone. He would have walked before the Leader in the normal course of events; taking precedence, but the Leader wasn't a pace or so behind. And Slan was wearing both of the crosses, his own and the Leader's.

He stalked by us like a panther.

We looked into the Leader's room expecting a revelation of one kind or another, something to bite on, that would make us part of history. What we saw made me part of nothing.

All that was left of the Leader was the soles of his boots.

It was all clear to me in an instant. It wasn't only tests of fitness that had made Slan's people into a small, alert group of supermen. Their logic was purer than ours.

They were cannibals.



## COMPUTER'S MATE

by

JOHN RACKHAM

*The human senses do not always register facts which are obvious to a machine designed to analyse such data. In such a case, who or what would best be suited to act as a link between man and machine?*



## COMPUTER'S MATE

CAPTAIN Sven Soren stared out at the grey neutrality that swam by the ship. His imagination moulded that non-dimensional nowhere-ness into impermanent fantasy-images. A cloudy Viking fleet rode frothy waves in quest of plunder and glory, so real that he could count the striding oars and the glitter of the shield-wall. Of course, and he curled his lip in the smile of a stable and sane man who had a firm rein on his fancies, he knew it was no more than imagination, and in that same second he let go the image and saw the neutral murk become anonymous again.

Pauli's exclusion-principle decreed that certain states were forbidden to matter. When an electron leaps from one permitted orbit to another it must pass through the forbidden in-between in no time at all. On that slender basis many theoreticians had cogitated, and engineers had laboured, and that nadir of neutrality out there was the result. A nowhere, an impossible state through which the ship, *Stellar One*, scurried at many multiples of the limiting speed of light that was the ultimate in "real" space-time. Strange that it should be such plastic stuff, Soren mused, then chuckled at his own fancies. His position here called for the ability to imagine, but also demanded he be sane enough to control those fancies—and a much more important matter was almost at hand. He glanced at the master-clock on the main control-panel and reached for the button that would stir out of slumber the rest of the ship's crew.

Hardly had he withdrawn his finger than he had to turn and smile as Edda, his wife, came hand-over-hand up through the hatchway into the control-room. Sturdy Edda,

serene and placid as always, her blue eyes smiling, her corn gold hair glossy and sleek even though she had only this moment risen from her pillow. She broke his image all unwittingly.

"I was not asleep. My intuition told me the time was near."

"You and your intuition. You forget the times when it is wrong!"

"It is never wrong on first-time things."

"Hah!" He made a long arm to hug her close and bestow a vigorous buss on her cheek before letting her settle into the co-master seat beside him. "This whole trip has been one 'first' after another. Your faculty must be well-worn." She shrugged off his mockery with a smile.

These two, in their early forties, were in love in a solidly unquestioning way, a love that stood on competence, confidence, harmony of character and shared talents. The Sorens had earned world-wide fame and respect as astronomers. It had been simple for them to add navigation to their accomplishments. It had been virtually inevitable that they would be selected as Captain and second-in-command for this epoch-making expedition. Soren had spoken the literal truth about "firsts". The ship was the first full-scale application of the Pauli-drive. This was the first star-jault from Earth. And now another "first" was due, by the clock. That bright star of the north, once the subject of dedication of the temples of Denderah in old Egypt, that jewel of the constellation of the Harp, Alpha Lyrae, the star that men called Vega, should be at hand in a matter of seconds.

Andrew Cartwright came up through the hatch and turned to extend a long arm to help his wife, Marie. He was tall, lean, dark and almost too obviously British to be true, his well-groomed ugly-handsome reserve typifying every cartoonist's idea of an English doctor. And that is what he was. Marie Leduc, now Cartwright, was also a

doctor, as competent in medicine, biology, and biochemistry as her husband, but she was utterly unlike him in every other way. Dark, petite, and dainty, she managed somehow to invest the white coverall she wore, just like all the rest, with the suggestion of individual design, as if it had been built for her by some couturier. She was all movement and gesture, sometimes intense, sometimes kitenish, but never placid.

Even now, where Cartwright nodded to the Sorens and took his seat, simply saying, "This is the big moment. We've arrived. Or not, of course," she had to clasp her hands and gasp, and eye the clock and then sink into her seat and clutch the padded arms as if defying anyone to steal it away from her.

"The break-out!" she muttered. "I dread it. Such a destructive sensation. I shall be sick!"

"Hold it! You can't start without us," Neil Frazer called as he gave his wife, Anne, a muscular boost up through the hatch and followed with a lithe squirm and leap. The Frazers might have been twins, or at least brother and sister, they were so alike. Bronzed, beautiful, and bursting with health and vigour, they gave off an air of abounding vitality that filled any compartment they happened to enter. Both were highly qualified physicists, very knowledgeable in electronics, and competent engineers. Anne flopped into her seat, winked at Soren, nodded at the clock, put up a thumb.

"Well!" she said. "We'll soon know, one way or the other!"

The seconds ticked away. Soren watched the sweep-hand and felt a quiet satisfaction. He had a good team. The Frazers kept the ship functioning; the Cartwrights kept the people functioning; and he had Edda to help him keep it all pointing in the right direction. A good ship. A good trip, so far. The experts, the chair-borne knowalls back on Earth, had predicted that the month-long tedium of slipping

through Pauli-space would be the hardest part. But they had confounded themselves by being so very clever in hand-picking a perfectly balanced group, so there had been no trouble at all. Arguments, yes! And they had all been briefly infected by flirtation-madness. But no lasting trouble. Edda the maternal said it, to remind them.

"What about the other one, the half-man?"

Soren frowned, touched a button on the intercom. "Are you awake, Mr. Wilson? Alert, on this important moment?"

"Yes." The reply was instant, the voice indifferent. Soren frowned more, shrugged his thick shoulders at the others. Grant Wilson baffled him, but there was no point in saying what they had all said many times during the month of tedium. Grant Wilson had "come with" the ship's computer, that huge and vitally important complex of electronics that lay in the heart of the structure but extended its sensors into every space, and outside too. That computer ran the ship, controlled all the mechanisms, was many times more expert than all the crew put together, and Grant Wilson cared for it. It was his sole task, and, seemingly, his sole interest. He had never associated, or made any attempt to associate, with the rest. Not that he had rebuffed their natural advances. He had just been indifferent. Not interested. As Edda had said, a "half-man".

"Soon now." Soren eyed the master-clock. "It is banal, I know, but I will count in the routine way. By the mark—five, four, three, two, one——" and there came that moment they all dreaded, even though it lasted literally no time at all, was over before the senses could properly analyse the soundless implosion, the utter darkness, the jump-jolt which came from all directions at once. First to react was the computer. From a myriad sensors it accepted precise data on plasma-density, electron-energies, variations in the electro-magnetic spectrum, and everything else in the vicinity that had energy enough to tickle its palate. This

mass of data it digested, arranged, compared, and evaluated then filed away in its capacious memory as star-patterns, planet-systems, temperatures and pressures, radiation hazards, and everything else that might be of importance to the humans who depended on it. Because of the abundance of new information, and the immense numbers of calculations and cross-references it had to perform, it was busy for several micro-seconds, and had scarcely completed the whole in time to catch the first gasp of wonder from the humans.

"Right on the nose!" Frazer jubilated. "Ain't that a lovely sight?"

"Vega," Soren nodded, as the polarizers screamed their faint song in abating the glare to tolerance levels. "Blue-white. And planets. A dozen at least." Edda was already buttoning for information from the visual read-out. He watched as she studied the display and reported:

"Fourteen. A mixed bag. Massive inners, gas-giant outers, just like Sol. Look, in the third orbit out from prime, a double-planet!"

"That can come later. The fifth looks promisingly like our home type. Close detail on that——" Seconds later she had extracted the information he wanted and he sucked in a deep breath of appreciation as he weighed the story of the symbols. "More good fortune, my friends. You see? It might be cousin to our own Earth. Well within the accepted parameters. At least"—he added the caution—"from here. We will know better still from an orbital survey." He swivelled his chair to face the navigation-console and got busy with the routine of telling the ship where to go next. Edda ran visuals on the other planets of the system, curiously. Cartwright touched his wife's arm.

"We might as well go back to bed, dear. Our busy time will be along later." She nodded and rose with him. The Frazers were already on their feet.

"Work to do," he grinned. "Hear that drive? Smooth as

cream, even after a month of idling. Come on, honey, let's go nurse our baby." His words were unnecessary. They could all hear and feel the shudder-growl of power as *Stellar One* heeled and spun to swing into an approach curve that would intersect the orbit of the fifth planet. After a moment or two the Sorens were alone again, while the view out there rioted with star-jewels and patterns of light and the ship careered into the domain of the blue-white star.

"I am uneasy," he admitted, watching the cosmic display. She took her attention away from her investigations and smiled.

"You too are having intuitions? Now, when everything goes so well. What bothers you, Sven?"

"Wilson. He is no trouble, no bother, no personality, nothing. And it's not right. I do not like things I don't understand." She put out her hand to pat him, understandingly. They had all been thoroughly investigated and then trained in the basics of socio-dynamics, as a safety measure to enable them to understand and put up with each other. But Soren had just that small extra responsibility of being in charge. In his mind's eye he saw it all again, that first concrete step. Tedious months of testing, selecting, then rehearsals with a mocked-up prototype, had all gone by successfully. The actual moment, now, of going aboard. Kennedy Field. The sterile machine-spider forest of structures as a background. The ship itself, poised as if eager to spurn the bosom of the Earth that had spawned it. The great central spindle-shape, one hundred and eighty feet of it balanced on shock-feet, thrust-vents ready to belch fire. And round it like a mighty wedding-ring the silver-bright hollow-tube hoop of the field-force drive, slung on fragile-looking spokes like some gigantic bicycle wheel.

Inside that toroid, cosmic energies would meet in hot combat, smashing the ultimate particles of matter into fusion, generating power on a scale hitherto only dreamed

of, now available. Power that focused on the space-volume enclosed by the hoop, struggled to eject anything caught there, caught at the spindle and tried to throw it away. But the spindle had its own sturdy thrust and resisted being ejected. So the whole became a dynamic balance of power, interchanging effort, a closed system that moved without dependence on anything but itself. As now it tilted in towards that fifth planet of Vega.

Soren cast another quick glance at his instruments and everything was as it should be. The computer was taking care of it, as it was designed to do. It master-minded everything. It did precisely what it was told. Its green faces and available keyboards were to be found in every work space in the ship. Soren frowned—not so much at the thought that the computer was the real master here, because he was much too sane to let that thought hurt his ego—but at the mental image of the man who came “with” the computer. He saw again his ceremonial meeting with the Project Director, and his aide, and the Chief Designer. He recalled, all over again, the surprise announcement that there would be one extra man “to service and maintain” the computer. Presumably that was what Grant Wilson did. He certainly did nothing else, nor was he ever seen more than a step or two away from the central complex. He lived with the thing, literally. He would be there now. Soren touched the swivel microphone that hung from his chair-back

“Mr. Wilson?”

“Yes.” The reply was flat, without even the hint of a query, and fast.

“How long before we will be in stable orbit?” Soren watched the ripple of figures on his own read-out panel as he asked the totally unnecessary question. Wilson’s reply was immediate, without time for thought.

“Three hours, fourteen minutes, thirty-nine seconds.”

It matched the panel figures precisely. “As if he did nothing but watch the damned thing,” Soren thought irrit-

ably. Smoothing his voice he said, "I shall be making a tour of inspection. I may call in and see you."

"Yes." Again that flatly non-interested monosyllable. Soren released the button, gave a last embracing glance at instruments and swirling stars, and went down through the hatch to where Edda had laid out a meal for him. She lingered just long enough to tell him she would be busy unpacking the observation equipment, particularly the Schmidt, and cameras and plates, then left him to eat and think. The little enigma nagged him. Edda had called Wilson the "half-man" and the name had meaning in exactly the same way that Frazer meant it when he called the computer "idiot". Soren had a deal of respect for his wife's instincts. Perhaps the man was abnormal in some way.

Behavioural science had long since rejected the wishful-thinking theory of sublimation. Biological drives are specific and substantial, not to be fobbed off with substitutes. One might as well believe it possible to substitute "spiritual" values for food and drink. That had been tried, but fasting produced only hunger, weakness, emaciation, and eventual death, to the orchestral accompaniment of hallucinations. "Imagination" does not sate the flesh. Yet Wilson was a man, and unpaired. Soren shook his head irritably. "Computer's mate," he thought, and sneered at himself for thinking it. Yet it was just as ridiculous to assume that the experts would have picked a "queer" for a trip like this.

He started his tour, moving slowly and methodically from one compartment to the next and missing nothing. The Cartwrights were in their spoke-tube laboratory, intent over instruments. He looked in but did not disturb them. Another tube door stood ajar and he saw Neil Frazer at the far-out end inspecting the torus-flux recorders. Down another level he found Anne Frazer in the jet-meter room. It was hot. She was checking flow-rates actual against ideal performance figures charted alongside each one. Her white

coverall clung damply to her and she unzipped and bel-  
lowed it as she caught sight of him.

"Hot!" she complained, pretending not to know that she was exhibiting her semi-nakedness for his approval. He knew the unwritten rules and was just as falsely innocent in suggesting:

"Why don't you take the thing off and be cool?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Men! You're all alike!"

"Your fault for being so attractive, my dear." He moved on, unmoved. It was a game, not serious, yet it had meaning in that it acted as a kind of mutual reassurance of normality. "We all have our little ways," he mused, and came to the door of the computer-room. It was massive yet so well balanced that it swung open at a touch, showing him the man who had no "little ways" at all.

Grant Wilson was slumped bonelessly in his padded seat watching the ceaseless dance of lights across the major console. A spring-band round his forehead supported an ear-piece insert and microphone, trailed leads to a package in his breast-pocket. A cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth and the air was blue with stale fumes. Another oddity. Of them all, Wilson was the only one who had the old-fashioned tobacco habit. At the faint sigh of the door he came up erect to his feet in a sinuous, cat-like movement, fast but with no sign of deference, haste, guilt, or anything else. About five feet ten, his first-impression effect was of grey neutrality. His coverall, unlike the rest, was plain grey cotton. His hair was a skull-close fuzz of steely grey. Even his eyes were grey, and indifferent, as he looked at Soren.

"Must you smoke so much?" Soren complained testily. "You'll kill yourself the way you go on."

"I am in perfect health." It was a statement rather than retort, and made with level conviction.

"Anything to report? Any defects?"

"None."

Soren felt baffled. He had the stultifying sense that his world was one of meaningless conventions, none of which had any value for Wilson. The gambits didn't work. He couldn't give this man an order, simply because if there was anything to be done he would be doing it without waiting to be told. He couldn't converse, because Wilson had no conversation. He couldn't "reach" the man, at all. Words were futile. Still, he made one more try.

"Frazer and the Cartwrights are outside the radiation shield zone. See they are warned when we approach the ionization layers."

"Yes."

Soren shrugged, went away back up to main control, where Edda was just making the last adjustments to the photographic rigs. Vega's fifth offspring was well within visual range now. He had watched Earth grow in a view-screen many times on the runs between Earth and Mars and Venus. This planet had many familiar characteristics. In a while the Cartwrights came to join him.

"A pleasant surprise," the Englishman murmured. "The cloud formations are right. Tectonic features are everything one would want. There should be life here, don't you agree?"

"Yes indeed. And how remarkable that is. Our own planetary system is utterly sterile apart from Earth. Many brave dreams withered when we discovered that. Those who had said all along that life was a freakish thing were confirmed in their opinion, even if it did make us all feel lonely. But now, when I look at what we have found, it is tempting to assume that we are not, after all, alone."

"Our instruments yield everything one could ask for. Visible wave-lengths, absorption figures, oxygen balance, water-vapour, chlorophyll lines."

"If we do not find life there," Marie Cartwright declared, "it will be because it hides from us, or we fail to recognize it."

The first thin protests of tortured atmosphere began to sing through the hull. The Frazers came tumbling up through the hatch as playfully as two puppies, to settle into their seats and strap in, all ready for the jolt and press of matching the velocity and course of *Stellar One* with the looming planet below.

"It'll be V-5 in the records," Frazer said, "but we ought to be able to dream up a name for it."

"Let's do that," Anne agreed. "Why don't we anagram our initials?"

"Christian names only," Cartwright qualified. "I'd hate to try to work up a twelve-letter name, and there isn't a vowel in our surnames."

"I'm no good at that game," Edda cried off, "or anything that means a play on words."

"Nor me," Marie sighed. "But it is a good idea, anyway."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Frazer grinned. "Six letters. S.E.A.M.N.A. Six to the sixth possible combinations, at least half of which will be unpronounceable. The idiot would play with it for us."

"We will do it ourselves," Soren declared. "The computer is busy now, bringing us into orbit. I give you the most obvious. Seaman!"

Frazer roared at it, suggested one of his own. Anne sneered, offered a counter suggestion. For a while they tossed unlikely words and sounds at each other, in between grunts of resistance as the ship jockeyed and veered. Edda watched and listened indulgently, then brought the bickering to a halt by catching her seat-back microphone and speaking into it.

"Required, a phonetically acceptable combination of the first letters of the Christian names of the ship's complement."

At once the special-reference screen began to print out, in random sequence—GAMANES . . . GEMANAS . . . GAMESAN . . . ENGAMAS . . . MANEGAS . . . AGNESMA . . . MESAGNA . . .

MEGNASA . . . and they watched it in stunned silence until she found her voice and said "Cancel!" The screen darkened. "We will call it V-5," she declared and the subject was closed.

The lurching, none of it severe, grew more frequent and for a steady half-hour the jets coughed and roared, shaking the hull, setting gauges and needles dancing wildly. Then, with relief, the read-outs settled into stable passivity. Soren studied the information.

"A thousand-mile path. That should give us about two hours to orbit. The sensors will gather the technicalities, of course, but I think we ought to use our eyes and see what is down there from our point of view." A switch darkened the control-room so that they could stare out, winding up the magnification until they saw seas and continents, islands and mountains steadily unreeling before them. It could have been Earth, rearranged.

"That is undoubtedly vegetation, and of an advanced type," Cartwright declared. "There has been vulcanism, obviously, but long since overgrown."

"Sure looks lush," Frazer agreed. "Plenty of rivers. No sign of a frost belt that I can see."

"No axial tilt," Soren pointed out. "The rotation period is roughly thirty hours. That would modify any extremes in climate. But the magnetic fields and radiation belts are favourable. We should be able to decide some momentous questions here. One might say the whole of biological theory is in the balance, eh, Andrew?"

"Physical theory too," Cartwright smiled, "will have to account for this amount of vulcanism in the absence of a satellite. What does that do to tidal-drag mechanics and gravitational influence?"

"Well," Anne declared, "if there's any great civilization down there, you could fool me. I don't see it, not a sign."

"Would we necessarily recognize it?" Marie argued. "And must it be on land? Our own Earth is four-fifths

water, where all life was born. For some reason we shall never know now, life decided to move on to dry land, which is hard and cruel. Perhaps, here, it had more sense!"

"That's cock-eyed," Frazer retorted. "What's so cruel about dry land living, for Pete's sake?"

"Marie is right," Edda put in. "You, an engineer, should know. You have the drag of gravity, temperature variations, the constant threat of dehydration, weathering, corrosion, oxidation—a hundred effects which the sea is free of. We gave away security and comfort and took on ceaseless danger when we abandoned the sea."

"And we all of us recapitulate that, when we come into the world," Marie came back with mischievous triumph. "For the nine months before you were ejected from the womb, you lived in the dark, under water."

"It is part of human nature to seek for adventure and strife," Soren nodded, smiling. Frazer, like all of them, had kept his eyes intently on the unfolding panorama below. He was the first to spot and declare.

"That's it, folks. We'll never see a handier spot to settle on. It's a natural!" There was immediate agreement. Even Soren had only a qualification to add.

"We will need several landing sites, not just one, but that must certainly be top of the list." He adjusted a vernier to set cross-hairs on the spot where a continental edge bulged out into blue sea, a place where the bulge suddenly folded back in on itself in a semi-circle to form a lake-smooth bay. There was rich green, suggesting grass, a border of yellow-white beach, and well-wooded hills lying back some fifteen to twenty miles from the natural harbour. A river wound its placidly curving way to the sea just there. He read off the co-ordinates, punched them into the computer with instructions, and the special-access screen immediately put up a bright green query-mark. He frowned, reached for his microphone.

"I have just entered the co-ordinates for our first-choice landing-site. I get a query answer. Why?"

"Contra-indicated." Wilson's reply was immediate.

"On what basis?"

"Probabilities better than eighty per cent the site is already inhabited. Signs indicate extensive settlement."

"What signs?" Cartwright muttered, staring at the view. "I can't see anything." Nor could the others. Soren frowned again.

"I override the probabilities. The site stands unless more concrete evidence is forthcoming." The reply screen blanked. There was no comment from Wilson. Soren pushed away his microphone. The ship swung into the night side of the planet.

"Arguments yet!" Frazer snickered. "Now the idiot is telling us what not to do." Cartwright looked puzzled, scratched his jaw.

"I don't know of any parameters that would indicate the probable choice of a living area. Do you suppose that thing has data it's not passing on?"

"Bound to, Andy. It's designed to grab everything there is, and save it for our use, whenever we ask."

"It was probably Wilson, doing a bit of evaluation on his own," Anne hazarded. "After all, he has to do something down there, or go nuts."

"Perhaps the machine just made a mistake," Marie suggested, and all three men turned on her at once. Soren spoke for them.

"That cannot happen, my dear. The computer may fail. That is something quite different. An element may burn out, or a connection break down. But this it will immediately indicate, and Wilson will adjust or repair, will deal with it. But it cannot make a mistake."

Her face showed her unwillingness to accept this. Her expression was mirrored on the faces of the other two females. Frazer chuckled.

"Sex differences. I never yet knew a woman who could understand this idea, that logic is absolute."

"No machine is infallible," his wife protested. "If that machine is so perfect, why are we here?"

"Let me try," Cartwright smiled. "Look, two times two is always four. It can't be anything else. Or think of it this way. Say you wanted a yard and a half of material to make a dress—no, don't interrupt just yet—just assume that. You take a ruler, measure, cut, and start sewing. And then you find you haven't enough. It should have been two yards and a half. Who was wrong, the ruler? Think of the ruler as the device. It measures, accurately, whatever you want. But if you have the wrong data to start with, you'll get the wrong answers. The ruler won't argue. The comp is like that. Give it the wrong data, ask it the wrong questions—it won't know any different. It will give you the logically correct answer from what you've put in and want out. It won't be wrong, but you will. See?"

"This is why people are still subconsciously afraid of machines," Soren murmured. "Because they make no allowance for the human tendency to err. They are totally rational and we are not. We can cling to and believe in a foolish thing, against all the evidence. Remember phlogiston? No logical machine would have tolerated such a concept for one second." The first grey-blue edge of dawn showed ahead and the discussion lapsed in the face of work to be done. They all had much to do in readiness for the first sorties out on to the surface. By the time the warning chimes had summoned them back to the control-room, Cartwright was smiling broadly.

"I have the answer. So simple. I hope it will ease the minds of the ladies. Think now, what did we do, as soon as we saw that location? We all said, unanimously, that it was the ideal place to land. Didn't we? And didn't the computer work out exactly the same answer? That it was the ideal spot—therefore it would already be inhabited?"

"Hah!" Soren snorted. "Of course. We are blind fools. Very good, Andrew. You are almost certainly right."

"All the same," Frazer grunted as the first crushing weight of retrojets struck them, "the idiot called a bum play. There's nothing down there that looks like people!" They were on the five-hundred mile mark and falling, the chosen site vividly clear down there. The scene swelled and grew huge, a peaceful green valley where a river meandered down from the forested hills to the sparkling waters of the bay.

"That rocky outcrop will suit us very well." Soren made a corrective adjustment and the ship's fall veered obediently to aim for a bare patch of vari-coloured rock, a mesa about four miles by three. They fell comfortably, the sensation nothing more upsetting than riding an elevator. Until they were just under five miles from surface. Then, without warning, the brake-jets roared their thunder and the helpless six were crushed into their seats for several agonized breaths.

"We've halted!" Soren growled, when he could speak.

"Going back up!" Frazer grabbed for his microphone. "What's going on, Wilson? You trying to rupture us?"

"That is a city. We are altering course to descend clear of it, to the landward side."

"A city? That hunk of rock?"

"Observe the regular formations, the unit assemblies." Wilson's voice was as unmoved as ever as the ship rose a little and began to slide sideways.

"What regular formations?" Soren demanded. "We can see bands, irregularities, distorted strata, that's all."

"Wait!" The computerman's voice grew a sudden edge. They peered in indignation at the crazy-paving bands of grey and yellow and brown down there. Wilson spoke again. "I am inserting colour-filters—now!" The view became harshly amber and the staring six gave a choral gasp

as they saw, now, the patterns and arrangements they had missed before.

"God!" Soren breathed. "What was that, then, some form of camouflage?"

"Probably a different visual spectrum range from ours," Cartwright guessed. "Whatever it was we can't land there. It's enormous!"

"It sure is," Frazer agreed. "The basic unit seems to be hexagonal. See the big ones surrounded by little ones? And that's a hell of a wall all round the place. If they're hostile we could be in bad trouble. Better not go down at all."

"Wilson!" Soren kept his voice crisp. "Are there any hostile signs, threats, signals, anything of that nature?"

"None. We are landing half a mile to the landward of the wall. There should be a waiting period subsequent to landing, to gather further data."

"Agreed, Proceed," Soren snapped, pushed the microphone away, and the amber filters dropped out. Cartwright knuckled his eyes.

"Tinted glasses should help."

Edda asked, "What sort of life uses a hexagonal base unit?" and Marie furrowed her forehead in thought.

"In our experience, only insects. If that applies here, the outlook is bleak. Not good." They groaned as the ship jockeyed its way down the last critical moments of descent. Ion-jets spouted blue fire as *Stellar One* let herself delicately down on her shock-feet and settled. The sudden silence left echoes into which the routine small noises timidly grew again. Then came the click and creak of the torus-spokes taking the weight as the force-field died gradually away.

"What's so bad about insects?" Anne demanded. "Not that I care for the things, mind. Especially spiders. But we would expect alien life to be—well, alien, wouldn't we?"

"The point is," Cartwright explained, "that we would have virtually no hope of striking an understanding. A re-

lationship. We can understand, deal with, tame, and/or domesticate almost any mammalian form. History so proves. But although we have long known that insects have intelligence and social systems and we have studied them very carefully, we have never been able to reach them with any kind of understanding, not even on our own planet."

By rows and clusters the instrumental indicators winked out of red "active" into green "stable", until all was quiet. Frazer sighed and stretched.

"Now what? Do we just sit and watch the thing?"

They all knew that he meant the "city" near by. Soren put up a finger.

"Let us not lose perspective," he warned. "We have had more stress and tension in just a few hours than we have had for the whole of the preceding trip. I suggest we rest and make sensible precautions. As for keeping watch, we can let the computer do that, a task for which it is admirably suited." He caught at his microphone again. "Mr. Wilson, you will programme the computer to keep watch on that settlement over there, and sound the alarm in the event of any threat, or development of interest."

"Imprecise." Wilson's voice was as flat as ever. "Any intelligence is potentially interesting, potentially a threat. Define."

Soren compressed his lips, breathed through his nose, hard. "By threat I mean any approach or movement indicating physical force. By interesting I mean any movement or operation by individuals or groups that we can see and note. Understood?"

"Yes."

"And add this, as a general order. No one leaves the ship for the next twenty-four hours. At all. From then until such time as we are satisfied it is safe to dispense with them, atmosphere suits will be worn. Right?"

"Yes."

Soren thrust the microphone away again. "I don't know

which is worse, when he argues or when he agrees. Either way, one feels futile. I shall go to bed. There seems little better to do."

The twenty-four hours wait came to its end eventually, brought them to the freshness of a sunny dawn, as misty and golden as any Earth could show. The Cartwrights had run through all the tests they could mount from inside the hull and had recorded their findings in detail for the data-banks. The Sorens had taken first-reference sky-maps and refined orbit and rotation-period figures. And the Frazers had run into a curiosity. With only the machinery to check over and prepare for service, Neil had decided to use some of his spare energy and time investigating geological features.

"And the magnetic field readings are crazy. Everything else is fine. 'G' is Earth-normal plus about point oh-five. Surface radiation is negligible. Temperature variations, barometric pressures—all that. But either this mud-ball has a fluctuating magnetic field, or my instruments are crazy."

"Well now," Cartwright smiled, "I may have given the impression that the biological side is beautifully normal. It is, on a first approximation. But we have our anomalies, too. There is life here. Vegetation we can see. Airborne bacteria we've found. But apart from that so-called city over there, we've seen nothing else. Insects, birds, fauna of any kind, big or small—not a sign! And that's not right, you know."

"The more I look at the heap over there, the less it spells city to me," Frazer declared. "I reckon what we saw from overhead was an illusion of some kind. Look, the waiting period is up. No alarms. Why don't we go over and take a closer look? I'd like the chance to do some mobile checks on the flux-field anyway. Andy?"

"If it's all right with you, Sven? I ought to go, being the biology man, I suppose."

"Very well. This variable magnetism, it will hamper the radio link?"

"No, it's not *that* powerful. We'll be in touch all the time." Soren followed as they made their way to No. 2 airlock, saw them into their protective coveralls and then went to check with Wilson while they were being pumped out. The computerman rose, exactly as he had done before, and waited expressionlessly.

"Cartwright and Frazer are about to quit the ship and investigate the city-like structure. You will maintain radio contact and keep records, just in case they encounter trouble."

"Yes. The intelligences are not hostile."

"What intelligences?"

"The dwellers in the city."

"What dwellers?" Soren cried. "You mean to say you've detected entities? What shape, what manner of creature are they?"

For once Wilson exhibited emotion, the signs of inner struggle. "They have no shape, are not like any creatures we know or can describe."

"Hmm! That's not much help. You're certain?"

"Nothing is certain."

"Bah! Look here, Wilson, you've been at close quarters with that damned brain-machine so long that you are beginning to think the way it does. You say there are intelligences over there, but that they have neither shape nor form nor any characteristics by which we would recognize them—do you know what that adds up to? Nothing. Nothing at all. A theoretical construct. I've no wish to be hard on you, Wilson, but in future you had better confine yourself to your own field, the gathering and storage of data. Understand?"

"Yes."

"And open that radio-link to the ship's communication

system, so that we can all hear what those two men are doing."

He snorted and swung away, went back to the view from the control-room. He saw Frazer and Cartwright striding away over the grass to the rock wall. He watched and wound up the magnification to keep them in view. After a while he opened a voice-link.

"Frazer. Cartwright. I see you are almost up to the wall now. Anything unusual?"

"It's a beautiful morning. Makes me want to throw off my helmet and breathe some fresh country air. There's a pleasant breeze. This grass is as gentle underfoot as fine turf. But not a sign of anything alive yet. The thing ahead appears quite definitely to be a construction of some kind. You agree, Neil?"

"I'll go along with that. The face is about a hundred feet high, and the banding isn't strata at all, but processes. Like carvings, or cemented ridges. And definitely in patterns. Not geometrically regular, but patterns just the same. And it's pierced in lots of places. I don't know whether they are windows, tunnels, or what. What d'you reckon, Andy?"

"Difficult to say. One I can see from here appears to be tubular and glass-smooth. That's a tunnel, at any rate."

"And here's something. My magnetometer is really hitting the pins. By these recordings there are constant sweeps and eddies of magnetism nipping about all through that rock, changing and rippling all the time."

"That is very strange," Soren commented. "Do you understand it?"

"Offhand, no. But it seems to ring a faint bell, somewhere. Anne, you listening? Does it remind you of something?"

Anne Frazer's voice came, in a breathless chuckle. "Semiconductor levels. Could it be, Neil? A natural deposit of semiconducting ores?"

"Hey, I believe you've got it. Electron migration in re-

sponse to small temperature fluctuations, through a naturally occurring N-channel metal-oxide semiconductor. That would account, too, for the patterned processes. I mean, this might have been going on for centuries. The ore-atoms would tend to settle out along favoured pathways. Boy!"

"You mean," Soren cut in, "that this need not necessarily be the work of an intelligence, after all?"

"That's about it. Can't be too sure though, not until we've had a look inside."

"One at a time," Soren warned hastily. "Those magnetic eddies may shield the radio."

"That's a reasonable point. Neil, I'll wire up with you and go in. You stay here. If it's all right, you follow."

Soren watched, the magnification up to the limit. Part of his mind considered this new phenomenon wryly. So much for formless entities! He gave a chuckle as the full truth dawned on him. Of course! The computer itself was nothing more than a busy series of magnetic flowings and switchings, flux and eddy, electron paths. What more natural than it should recognize and identify this natural freak event as a "spiritual" brother, an intelligence?

"Reaching the end of the tunnel," Cartwright's voice broke in on him. "With only ten feet or so to go. Plenty of cable—Good Lord!"

"What's up, Andy?"

"The most fantastic thing. Exactly like a certain country village I know back home. Incredible. I know this place well! Neil, this is almost certainly a case of *déjà vu*. I've never been here before, obviously. And yet—I would swear——" his voice, steadily growing weaker, died into a mumble and was silent.

"Andy! Andy!" Frazer sounded agitated. "Hello, ship. Cartwright seems to have broken contact." A pause, then, "He has! The damned fool! The link cable is free. I'm hauling it in. Soren?"

"Hearing you."

"Right. I have the cable now. I am disconnecting my transmitter. I will stash it here, hook it up to my microphone, and then go in there and find Cartwright, see what he's up to. All right?"

"Very well. One word, Frazer. On no account will you also disconnect yourself. No matter what. Understood?"

"You bet. I'm not crazy. Here I go now. The tunnel is about five feet in diameter, appears to be around fifty feet long, bright lit at far end, smooth as glass. No sign of Andy. Sliding along. No trouble. Magnetometer is still fidgeting. This thing could be a natural wave-guide . . ."

Soren raised a cautionary hand as Anne and Marie came hurrying in to where he sat, to stare apprehensively at the view.

"... still no sign of Andy. Sunlight ahead. And rooftops. I hear sounds, noises. Man, those are traffic noises, I'd know them any time! And that is a fire-engine, or I never heard one. Can you hear it?" The white-faced listeners stared at each other in chill fear. They heard nothing but his excitement and laboured breathing. Then an abrupt click as he broke the contact. Anne Frazer put her hands to her face.

Marie said, "We must get them out of there quickly. The place is a hallucination-trap of some kind. Or worse. We cannot afford to waste time."

"Granted," Soren muttered, nodding as Edda joined them in silence. "But what can we do? We are probably just as defenceless as they!"

"It is true," Marie bit her lip. "We are all susceptible to some kind of illusion. We have drugs and devices to heighten this, psychedelics, hypnotics, hallucinogens—but nothing to reverse the tendency, to render immunity. Nothing!"

Anne Frazer put down her shaking hands, made an effort to be calm. "The fluctuating magnetic fields might have some connection with this. If we can find some way of

insulating against those, grounding them, shorting them . . .”

“My dear,” Edda said kindly, “if you don’t know, how can we help. It is your specialty.”

“I know,” she groaned. “And my Neil’s in there.”

Soren caught at his microphone. “Mr. Wilson?”

“Yes.”

“You have heard?”

“Yes.”

“Any helpful suggestions?”

“I will go and bring the two men back, if you wish.”

“You?” Soren was so totally taken aback by the unexpected words that he didn’t realize how offensive he was being. “You? But——”

“I will carry an extension cable and report everything I see and hear. The data may be useful.” That this man, seldom seen more than a step or two away from his beloved computer, should volunteer to leave the ship, go into unknown hazard and rescue two other men—Soren couldn’t get his mental teeth on it, at all. He cut off the microphone, scowled at the women.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I feel time is all-important, but I can’t see the sense in losing another man. On the other hand Wilson is probably more likely to be resistant to illusion than the rest of us, wouldn’t you say?”

“It is worth a try,” Marie whispered.

“I called him the half-man,” Edda breathed, “and now he shames me.”

“Very well, Mr. Wilson, go ahead. Can we help in any way?”

“Keep watch. I’m breaking out a motor-sled.” He must have begun as soon as the suggestion was originally made for it was only a matter of minutes before they had him in view, the purring sled sliding swiftly over the green grass with him standing and paying out a slim cable from a revolving drum.

"He's not even wearing a suit," Soren groaned, switching to the other communication-channel. "Mr. Wilson, you should be protected. We are still not certain about bacteria."

"The risk is negligible. I am now abreast of Frazer's transmitter. Taking it aboard. Connecting his cable to mine. The far end is free." They saw the sled halt, saw him jump down. "Have joined extra cable. Am now entering tunnel." The control-room became chokingly silent. They heard his breathing. They could see nothing but the abstract designs of the rock-wall, now blurred under extreme magnification.

"Leaving the end of the tunnel. The interior appears to be slightly bowl-shaped, extensive, floored with what appears to be silvery crystalline particles and dry white dust. It is in constant agitation, resembling wind-ripples on a lake surface. The hexagonal structures are numerous, large and small. I can see Frazer. And Cartwright. They lie motionless near the first large hexagon mound. Each is surrounded by a circling cloud of the sand-dust. I have reached Frazer now. He is unconscious. I am picking him up. The sand-cloud makes breathing difficult and unpleasant." They heard him gasping. Soren felt sweat burst out on his brow as he listened.

"Frazer in the tunnel-mouth now. I am going back for Cartwright." It was eerie to hear the even calm broken by harsh coughs and pantings. "Got both men in tunnel now. Using cable to bind them together. Hauling along. Fortunately the tunnel is smooth."

They watched the view tensely, saw the grey blur that was Wilson emerge from the tunnel and stagger to the sled under the weight of a limp body. Then again with the other. The sled lifted, came skimming back.

"Come on," Soren stirred urgently. "To the air-lock. Full decontamination. Whatever devilish things lurk out there, we must keep them out!"

They peered through the observation panels until they saw all three men were safely within, then the precautionary mechanisms went into action. Hot detergent sprays foamed, broke under the needles of fresh water, hot sterile air swirled, ultra-violet light scoured and burned, antiseptic mists clouded the small space, were whipped away by another draught of hot air, strongly ionized. Then they opened the door to let Wilson in, bedraggled but clean. Soren offered a hand. The computerman appeared not to see it.

"Recycle the sludge," he said. "An analysis of that sand and dust should be made. I must relay my data to the computer." He went away without ceremony. The women were too concerned to care. Marie Cartwright took charge, all her kittenish characteristics in abeyance now. The two unconscious men were carried to the sick-bay, stripped to the skin, and gone over with all the skill she could bring to bear. The others stood by and helped where she indicated. In the end, almost weeping with fear and frustration, she had to admit herself helpless.

"They are alive, unhurt, uninjured in any way I can discover—but unconscious. And feeble. The symptoms resemble shock, some wasting disease, or catatonia, but prolonged. It is incredible. In less than one hour it is as if they had been in coma for weeks. I will give massive plasma transfusion and antibiotics, but it is a policy of desperation. I do not know!"

Could she have heard Wilson talking to the computer she might have understood more, but it never occurred to her, or the others.

He sat bonelessly at ease, smoking, his grey eyes half-closed in thought as he recorded his impressions.

"The entities are alive in the sense that they possess autonomy. They inhabit the rock-structure. They need material substance in the sense that an artist needs canvas and pigments to make his mental images real. It is probable

that the original geological formation favoured the development of this type of intelligence over other forms in the evolutionary struggle. This would account for there being no traces of any other living form, because this form, which has no fixed shape, has an immense survival advantage over rigid biological designs. It is not subject to the constant need for food, repair, and the need to defend against injury and decay. It is probable there are many such concentrations on the planet, wherever the geological formations are favourable."

He paused, inhaled a lungful of blue smoke, and resumed.

"The non-hostile datum must be modified. The actions of Cartwright and Frazer could have constituted an invasion, or an irritant, a disturbance of some kind. From our viewpoint the result was injurious. It does not necessarily follow that there was hostile intention, any more than water is hostile because it drowns the person who falls in. There are several possibilities . . ."

He stopped as the panel before him broke into a flurry of rippling pinpoints of light. The display was as immediately meaningful to him as the change of expression on the face of an intimate friend. He rose, frowning. "They" had entered the ship. Apparently "they" liked the flavour of whatever it was they had gleaned from Frazer and Cartwright.

He thought hard, moved three heavy relays on a power-board, then left the computer-room, taking care to secure the door after him. The ship's geography made the sick-bay his first stop. He drew aside the sterile curtains and peered in. Marie Cartwright, who had been Marie Leduc before Andrew had courted and won her, stared tragically at the two unconscious bodies. Then, silent and strange, the dimmed quiet of the sick-bay dissolved and changed into the purple velvet and plumed luxury of a palace ballroom. A glossy floor tempted the dancing foot. Gorgeous cos-

tumes flattered the equally gorgeous women who wore them. Bravely ornate officers beamed a gallant welcome. Somewhere an orchestra did homage to a valse by Lehar—and a still small voice in her brain screamed that this was all false—but the grand illusion swamped the tiny cry of sanity and she yielded to the dream-come-true. Wilson was just in time to hear her soft sigh, to see something wraith-like and intangible as a smoke-puff rise up and quit her lifeless form. It shimmered and merged with a host of other half-seen things.

He closed the curtain again and went on up, frowning. It was something of this sort that he had seen in the dust clouds around the two men. He found Anne Frazer unconscious and barely breathing on her bed, the while her ghost-like alter-ego thrilled in shadowy exhilaration and rode a teetering, plunging surf-board down the running slope of a mighty and endless wave.

In the control-room Sven Soren's face hung in a vapid smile, slack and lifeless, while his dream-self rode in magnificent fury with a host of bright-eyed Valkyries, golden tresses snapping in the ghost-wind as they lashed their plunging steeds in triumphal return to Valhalla.

In the command cabin Edda sprawled supine and nudely defenceless, her corn-gold hair in disarray, her eyes shut, a dimly ecstatic smile on her face. She had seen the terrible beauty of Siegfried and had gone to him joyously, with never a backward thought.

Wilson turned to go back down, scowling as he tried to fit all these phenomena into some coherent pattern. So pre-occupied was he that he pitched head-first down a ladder and dashed himself against the metal wall at the foot before he realized how weak he had become. Then as he struggled to rise he knew why. "They" were sucking at his essence, just as they had the others, but not so easily because they had not been able to secure his willing co-operation. In that instant he shut off every other thought but the

one imperative, to get back to the computer-room. Fantasy-images flooded the space before, behind, and all around, seducing him. The hard reality of ladders and corridors grew dark and faint through the image-flood. He shambled on, groping, feeling, falling down, getting up again, bleeding from a dozen cuts and bruises but clinging to that one beacon urge. He covered the last few yards on his stomach, crawling and drenched with sweat, labouring to breathe.

Just to touch the armoured door brought a surge of strength, shivered the phantoms, sent them faintly screaming. He used the respite to suck in huge breaths and gather strength to stand and lean on the door, comforted by the knowledge that the multigauss field he had set up was a sure shield and defence against the "things". After a while he was strong enough to throw the door-dogs and stagger inside. In his mind it was as if he heard a screech of baffled rage. He slumped into his chair, reached for a cigarette, sucked it alight, then tapped out a series of postulates and approximations for the brain, asking for confirmation and best possible answers. Minimax circuits clucked and clicked, the machine scanned through its store of data bits and put up its findings in a series of pinpoint patterns of light. He studied them, sighed, and settled down to work, the first really hard work he had done in the whole trip so far.

Whereas it was a simple matter for Soren, in control, to move a group-switch that said "Torus-field on", it was a vastly more complicated matter to achieve the same result by operating all the relays individually. He knew the computer as intimately as any man knows the fingers of his own hand, but there was no simple way of doing it, for all that. By the time the toroidal field began to surge into life he was sweating, but he had the reward of "hearing" once again that baffled scream of frustration as the magnetic "things" were swept helplessly away under the multi-

megagauss field of the torus. As they fled the ion-jets began to spout. *Stellar One* spurned the soil of V-5 and went up into the blue with Wilson intent on the delicate and intricate task of programming precisely for a Pauli-jump back to Sol.

A month later, and long before she was expected, the spindle-and-torus ship erupted from nowhere into an orbit parallel to and just above Earth's asteroid belt. Out of the instruments of a thousand excited radio-watchers came two messages. One was short and endlessly repeated.

"This is *Stellar One*. Do not approach nearer than one hundred miles without adequate precaution. Suspect contamination. Recommend degaussing equipment. This is *Stellar One*. Do not approach . . ."

The other was longer, was prefixed "For the attention of Project Director, *Stellar One*", and gave the digested essence of events, their most probable explanations, and the lessons to be drawn from them, as well as a full account of the present physical condition of the crew, who were still alive but in desperate state. That message had taken Wilson much time and hard thought, plus the total resources of the computer's logical circuits. It brought a fire-tailed ship storming furiously up and away from the construction pits of Luna and into a cometary curve to intercept the returned *Stellar One*. On board were the Director, his aide, the Chief Designer, and a swarm of hard-eyed experts.

The Director listened to the third playback of the message and shook his head. "I can't say that I understand all the implications, not yet," he admitted. "I'm particularly baffled as to why this man Wilson seemed to have some kind of immunity from the things. And as for them, they have me utterly at a loss."

"Not easy to grasp, no," the Designer murmured. A long, lean, grey-haired man, he was much given to half-smiles which merely softened the habitual sadness of his face. He

was gentle as he suggested. "You must have done that trick in first-grade physics where you lay a sheet of paper over a magnet and then sprinkle iron filings, to show 'lines of force', yes? And you knew, of course, that there are no such things as 'lines of force'. That was just a way of helping you to visualize a concept. A magnetic field is simply a stress in space."

The Director sighed. "That doesn't help much."

"No. The visual display is the help. Without that it's almost impossible even to imagine. Or to communicate. An idea has to have a visual analogue before we can begin to grasp it. As Wilson says in the message, the crystalline particles and the dust, on analysis, showed organic patterns. The stuff of life. The magnet-entities could use that stuff, could manipulate to some degree any organic material."

"I can grasp that much. But those visions. Surely they were just so many hallucinations?"

The Designer smiled, fingered his grey hair. "Just what is the thing we call hallucination? An artist thinks of a beautiful woman. He daubs a series of coloured pigments on canvas, and we see a beautiful woman. But where? Has he made a mental construct so visible that we can see it? Or do we contribute something to that? And suppose I could somehow steal away from you all your power to cooperate, to make mental images in sympathy, what then? Haven't I robbed you of something essential?"

The Director shivered. "I suppose it must have been something like that. Your man calls them 'spiritual energies'. It's an archaic term, a metaphysical idea. But it fits. A tremendous chap, that. I'll admit I was none too happy about adding him to the select crew-list on your insistence. But I'm glad we did, now. He ought to get a public honour, at least!"

"Nothing like that," the Designer was quick to protest. "He wouldn't accept it."

"You sound positive. Do you know him *that* well?"

"I should. His full name is Grant Wilson Norris. My son."

"Ah!" The Director felt he was treading on delicate ground. "That explains a lot."

"It does not. Look here, this must be strictly between us, but you've a right to know. The boy will not accept honours, won't understand publicity, doesn't even know he has done anything remarkable. He's an idiot."

"Oh, come now!"

"That is quite literal. He is an idiot. We first began to suspect it when he was small, in his second year. My wife never got over the shock. I was tempted to have him put away somewhere, in a home. Best for him, you know? The experts examined him, agreed that he had some kind of brain defect that couldn't be repaired. Ironical, isn't it?" The Designer smiled, but now the sadness was deepened.

"I'm recognized to be brilliant, one of the world's leading designers of 'brains', and my only son is a mental defective."

"But . . ." the Director floundered, "... I don't understand!"

"Nor did I, until I discovered something quite by accident. And grabbed it, worked on it. You're about to see the result. This"—he tapped his forehead—"the cerebral cortex, the bulging forebrain, is what makes man, and plagues him. This is where we dream dreams, create abstractions, mock up our inner world, and make decisions. Here lives the ego and the id, and all our soul, spirit, our humanity. Grant Wilson has something wrong, just there. It doesn't connect. He has no power to abstract, to dream, to imagine. He has no soul. By himself he would never take a decision, initiate any action. But, one day when he was no more than three, I found him playing with one of my earlier models and using it. And he is still doing that—using the computer as a substitute for the defective part of his brain."

"Good Lord! You mean, he's dependent on it?"

"Totally. He grew up with it, needs it as much as you need eyes and hands. That's why he went along, at my insistence."

"But, Good Lord, man!" The Director was aghast. "A defective? He could have been a dreadful liability!"

"You still don't see it, do you? Grant needs that computer the way a cripple needs crutches or a wheelchair. But the machine needs him, too. By itself it is just a machine, an idiot-calculator. He supplies the human-value factor. Together they make a whole. Without that our ship would never have come back at all."

In the computer room, Wilson saw the signal from the approaching ship and felt relieved. Everything was in order. The crew people were unconscious but had been cared for and would be cured, given time. He had the data all to hand for that. Only one thing had worried him. Long ago the computer had decided, in unconscious agreement with Charles Dickens, that a man should have at least one vice. It knew that Wilson was not the cancer-prone type, so it had decided he should smoke tobacco and thus complete the picture. But he was down to his last one. He lit it now with a sense of relief. There would be more on the approaching ship, he felt sure.



# TRYST

by

JOHN BAXTER

*Against the sprawling galactic backdrop of a dying Empire, it was illogical for Centre to send rose petals to the colonists on Dismas instead of merchandise. Someone would have to make the journey to find out why . . .*



## TRYST

THE empire of Kings sprawled like a spread-eagled giant across the galaxy's tilting lens.

Among the central stars where imperial influence was strongest the trails of commerce gave the Kings hegemony over a huge volume of space extending almost without hindrance from the upper surface of the universe to the lower. This was the body; thick, solid. An anchor.

Beyond Centre, the tracks of communication and trade became less broad, condensing into four well-used trails, each leading to one corner of the galaxy. The limbs of light reached out into the darkness, groping for stars as a man picks fruit. Races were gathered in, catalogued, and forgotten in a matter of weeks, stars and their systems added to the empire so often that even the Kings were unsure of what they ruled.

But there had to be a limit. As the searching fingers approached the thin rim edge, curiosity was replaced by caution. There were systems on the very edge, stars around which circled worlds whose nights were not always filled with stars, which swung nervously for a few weeks each year into the eternal emptiness before returning like frightened children to the warmth of familiar suns. The Kings, for all their power, were human. They stopped there.

I came from one of these forgotten worlds, a place called Dismas. It was barren, poorly settled, dull. Nobody, not even the Kings, was very sure why it was colonized at all when others around were left untouched, but there were people on Dismas and they were supplied with the necessities of life just like everybody else. We even sent some things back when the crops didn't fail.

Our ship came down the long route from Centre, via Lai, Durrell and Gamma Pi, Greville, Jacob's World, and Humpty Doo, past a thousand unnamed stars on the long dull road to infinity that is just barely a return trip. Except for the yearly ship, nobody on Dismas would have known there was an empire, nor cared. Perhaps that is why all this happened.

It might have been different if we had cared.

On Ship Day I went out to the edge of the valley, as far as I could go from the town. I liked to see the ship come down, and you couldn't do that in town. The buildings got in your way or people jostled you. Something always happened. It was better to get away alone. The feeling I got when I saw the ship was stronger when I felt it with nobody else near me, as if this was a special thing that I shared with the ship, and it with me.

My favourite place was the big meadow below the pine forest. I got there at noon, just before the ship was due to arrive, and lay down in the grass to wait. It was warm in the sun; warm and restful. I looked up at the sky for a while until my eyes started to swim with the huge bright transparency of it.

Then I turned my head and looked at the grass waving all around me, a forest of green blades from this low angle. A tiny insect crawled up out of the grass and with dogged persistence negotiated the glacier of my outflung arm. I closed my eyes and felt for a moment the disconcerting sensation that the earth was tilting slowly under me.

The starship came.

A whistle first as it whined through the atmosphere in a braking orbit. I saw it arch across the blue sky, silver and quick. Around the world in half a minute, then back again, its sound coming up behind me like a wave. The noise! That glorious wailing torment, so huge that I feared it

almost as much as I loved it. It pinned me to the ground, and the ground trembled.

In the sky above me the ship steadied and then began to descend. The sound still echoed, but it was dying. That had been the fanfare. This was the royal arrival. As smoothly as a piston depressed in a cylinder of air, the ship lowered itself to the ground.

I sat up shakily and looked with surprise at the handful of brown earth and mashed grass I was holding. Armageddon was over for this year.

It took me most of the afternoon to hike back, but I never lost sight of the ship. The valley is so flat and the ship so huge that it is always visible no matter where you go. For a few days it becomes a landmark, and everybody feels small and insignificant until it leaves. For those few days Dismas is even more depressing than usual. It's the time when we all begin to wonder about the universe with which we've lost touch.

Storm clouds were foaming up in the west. It would rain tonight, perhaps even this evening. It was always like this on Ship Day. The weather went mad for a while.

As I walked back through the fields towards town I saw the same things that I'd seen every other Ship Day of my life; the crowds of farmers bringing in stock for slaughtering and trade goods for shipment, everybody who could walk and a few who couldn't pushing along the narrow roads. There was an air of urgency about them as if they were running from something rather than towards it. I wanted to stop one of them and ask, "What's the hurry?" but even if I had they would still have hurried.

At the edge of town I turned off the main road towards the street where we lived. Then, for some reason, I stopped and went back towards the field. There was no real reason why I should want to see the ship, but there seemed to be a different feeling about this day, a tenseness that I hadn't sensed before.

There was the usual crowd around the warehouses, curious farmers for the most part. My father had been a council man most of his life and while he was alive I had seen all that I cared to see of ships being unloaded and cargo distributed. I hung around at the rear of the crowd, wondering what I was doing there, and listening almost subconsciously to the talk around me.

It was the usual gossip; and yet, in the shuffle and mutter of the crowd I could sense a difference. It was odd, sometimes sinister. There was anger in it, and a muffled kind of violence that was worse than anger. In a few places around the edge groups had broken off and paused to talk among themselves. It had begun to rain, a grey drizzle that matched the mood of the people.

I grabbed the arm of one man as he went by.

"What's going on?"

He glared at me, shook off my hand and gestured towards the crowd.

"See for yourself."

The press around the door to the main warehouse was dense, but I pushed through. I had expected a guard, but there was none. The people outside seemed unwilling to go in. I looked down the length of the almost empty building towards the end that opened on to the landing field. Down there a number of men were standing just out of the reach of the rain.

As I walked through the warehouse I was surprised at its emptiness. With the automatic carriers working, much of the cargo should have been unloaded by now, but the place was almost deserted. A few piles of merchandise were being checked but the men working on them did so without interest. All the loading robots I saw were switched off.

I knew most of the men standing on the edge of the field. They were the ones who ran Dismas. All of them looked either worried or angry. Marcus Olit, the judge, was among them, his face as still and brown as a stone. He was my

godfather and I had known him since birth, but I had never seen him like this.

"Has something happened?"

Olit looked at me, then put his hand on my shoulder.

"Nicholas," he said. His intonation was strange, as if he had suddenly thought of me in quite another connection.

"Wait here," he said.

He went over to another group of men and spoke to them. All of them glanced once towards me, then made sure they didn't look again. There was a long discussion. I wondered what was being said about me. Then a few of them came over with Olit. I knew all the men. They represented a large section of the planetary council.

"You know everybody here," Olit said. "We want to show you something."

He went to a pile of boxes and took one. It was a small paper carton, so light that he could carry it easily in one hand. He gave it to me.

"This is part of today's shipment. According to the label and the manifest it contains electronic equipment."

I hefted it. The weight was right.

"So?"

"It doesn't." He pointed to the pile of boxes from which he had taken it. "There are fifty of them, all the same."

"Stolen?"

"We don't know what to think. Open it."

The other men watched as I pulled back the lid and looked down into the box. For a moment I thought the things I saw were some sort of packing, but when I pushed my hand in it went right to the bottom. At the same moment a cloud of perfume billowed up into my face. Turning the box upside down I emptied the contents on to the ground, watching the mud-streaked plastic obscured by a scarlet snow-storm. The box—all the boxes—were full of red rose petals.

I picked up one of the petals and crushed it between my

fingers. It felt the way rose petals always feel, silky and warm, like a living membrane veined with fluid-filled capillaries.

"They're real," Olit said. "Almost half a ton of them, all natural flower petals. Roses."

I smelled the crushed petal and dropped it to the ground. It had begun to rain harder. The red carpet stirred in the draughty hall.

"What about the rest of the shipment?"

Olit nodded towards the field where a line of new loading vehicles was parked. They were painted red and yellow, colours that glistened with rain against the grey concrete.

"Do they look all right to you?"

"Yes."

"Look more closely."

I peered into the rain. The metal fairings on the engines looked somehow crumpled, and some of the machines leaned wearily from the vertical. As I watched, one of them slowly sagged on to its side.

"They're made of paper and foil," somebody said. "Dummies."

"Have you contacted Centre?"

"How? Our radios don't reach that far."

"And there's nobody on the ship."

"It's empty. We can't even find a robot."

Half a mile from me the ship loomed, tall and alone, out of the rain before the grey curtain dropped once more. It was cold and damp in the warehouse, but that was only part of my reason for shivering. I was beginning to see why Olit had said "Nicholas" in that peculiarly significant way. I looked around at the men.

"You want me to go to Centre." It was a statement, not a question.

"Somebody has to go," one of the others said.

"Why me?"

"You're the logical choice, Nicholas," Olit said. "You have the background and the . . . well, you seem the best man. We all agree on that."

There was muttered agreement from most of the men there.

I smiled. The best man. This was nonsense and we all knew it. The real reasons were more subtle. I was chronically discontented. Since childhood I had revolted against the restrictions of Dismas, spoken out at meetings and parties against the stagnation of our life. Dozens of times I had declared I would be glad to leave the place if only I had the chance.

Now the chance was offered.

The fact that I was probably less qualified than any of them didn't matter. If somebody was sent they could forget the problem for a while, and if that person was not really one of them, nothing had been lost. Perhaps it appealed to their neat minds, this solution of two problems at once. I despised their reasons, but I knew there was only one answer.

"I'll go," I said.

From its base the ship was a steel cliff. I looked up and felt for a dizzy moment that the huge thing was toppling towards me, but it was only the scudding of grey clouds across the sky.

The cargo hoist took us upwards. The three of us clutched the stabilizing wires as the ground below us became less and less distinct, the wind more powerful. When the platform stopped at the loading door we were higher than even the hills that surrounded our valley. Yet the ship went on for another thirty levels.

One chamber was enough to house the goods that Dismas was to send back to Centre. It was huge, but so much had been packed into it that the dimensions were difficult to judge. There was no light except the slab that came through the cargo door, although the room had

another opening, a low wide one leading to what looked like a corridor. The door was of the wrong size for human beings. Like everything else on the ship, it was made specially for robots.

"What now?" I asked.

"It's up to you," Olit said. "When you get to Centre, investigate the position and try to straighten things out."

"Do you think I can possibly do anything?"

"Your best," Olit's companion said lamely.

I looked around the room.

"What about food?"

"Take what you need from the cargo. There's plenty there."

We stood around awkwardly, each waiting for the others to say something. I began to feel an emotion close to panic.

"No need to wait," I said. "I'll be all right."

Olit seemed about to speak, but grunted instead. At the cargo door we shook hands quickly, without warmth.

As they stepped on to the platform, I remembered something important.

"When does it take off?"

"Soon," Olit said. "A few minutes—an hour perhaps. We've loaded all we're going to load. It usually takes off as soon as we disconnect the cargo hoist."

They dropped out of sight as automatically as actors on a stage. The cable whined for a time, then stopped. I stood facing the door, looking out at the grey sky and the upper rim of the hills. There was a click somewhere under the floor and the door inched downwards, a black blade slicing the tenuous connection between myself and the world. I was alone in the ship.

Nothing happened. It was quiet in the cargo bay and I sat on a bale of wool, smelling its pleasant greasy tang. Waiting. There was no real light, but a faint yellow glow came through from the corridor. The air was warm and

smelt oily. I wondered in a vague way whether there was enough air in the ship to keep me alive. I would have to hope that there was.

When boredom overcame inertia I went to the door and looked out. There was a long hall as wide and high as the door. It curved away from me on either side. With its regular openings, presumably leading to other holds like the one I was in, the corridor was like a demonstration in pure perspective, and I the human figure drawn in for scale. But because the chamber was dark and the corridor at least had light, I began to explore.

I found two things.

The first was a robot. It stood in the centre of the hall, silently surveying its own private domain of warm yellow silence. I watched for a long time before approaching, but it didn't react to my presence. The robots on Dismas were simple wheeled platforms with mechanical manipulators attached, but this was different. No extensors or tools gave a hint of its function. It was all head, a single metal sphere balanced on a gyroscope, that was all. It stood about chest high and, except for the spinning flywheel and the intermittent pulse of red light behind the glass bubble that I took to be its "eye", there was no sign that it was activated. It did nothing as I went past, and when I looked back quickly it was still there in the same place, motionless, as if the effort of standing eternally *en pointe* was sufficient justification for its existence. No robot has ever noticed me. They have no time for humans. Only She ever worried them.

And "She" reminds me of the second thing I found; a scarf, lying in the corridor, as still as a dead butterfly. Its colour was pale, almost watery blue, a tint that registered more in the mind than the eye, like a scrap of sky with all the clear light-absorbing transparency of bright air.

At first I thought a Dismas girl had dropped it, but when I picked it up, and felt its weightlessness, I realized that it

must belong to Her. At that moment I conceived the image of the woman who had sent the rose petals, who had played this dark and scented joke on us. The scarf seemed part of her, a ghost of her presence that still lingered here in the ship. I rubbed the cloth between my fingers and lifted it to smell the perfume which seemed to give it the only substance it possessed.

As I did, there was a rumbling below me and a vibration that trembled up through the floor and walls of the ship. I was crushed to the floor by the pressure of a huge soft hand. The last thing I remembered was the feel of the scarf in my hand and the scent in its folds; the scent of roses.

Time both ties and steadies us. As long as I had reference points in the past and the future, the gap between them could be bridged easily enough. The cargo from Dismas was a place where I could eat, sleep, think, while her scarf represented the future and a world beyond the one I knew. My life hung on that scarf and its fragrance, but though I searched for its owner down the long and empty corridors of the ship, I found no living creature there.

Slowly I became used to the loneliness and the still warm air. Even the sound of the ship ceased to be noticeable and merged into the background, providing a neutral surface against which I picked up every noise, even to the soft concussion of my own heart. There were times when I sensed a pattern in the sound of those machines, some measured movement beneath the ordinary mutter of wheels and relays. When I was near to sleep it was clearer, and as I dozed it would seem for a moment to be a sort of music, made for unhuman ears.

The robots lived and worked high in the ship, above a solid bulkhead through whose doors I could not penetrate. Sometimes when I was near the robots' area there would be a new tang in the air, a bitter smell that I recognized finally as ozone, but which seemed like the sweat of robots, given

off as they laboured over my head, whirling among their master machines in a haze of lulling mathematical sound. So noise dominated my life in the ship and I moved with ringing ears through the warm soft air, feeling always the tingling vibration of the huge ship around me.

Until one day, it stopped.

It was this absence of sound that told me the ship had landed. I was asleep, and when I woke it was with a blind and irrational fear that something had happened, some event that hovered on the edge of consciousness, mantled in sleep. The world was different, dead.

It took me a long time to realize that nothing had changed physically, and longer still to work through all the possible reasons for this new feeling, so that the realization came to me slowly, in a way I could accept and adjust to.

When I felt used to the idea of having arrived on another world, I went to the outer door and waited for it to open. It stayed shut, so I tinkered with the panels and switches around it until, grudgingly, it crept upwards.

I looked out on Centre.

I remember the day, clear and warm, the blue sky, limitless and unmarred except by a sketch of clouds and blue haze where, in the far distance, a mountain range rimmed the horizon. I remember a breeze that fingered my hair, and the city.

The Kings were scientific beings. They built with a cold precision that would allow no barrier to perfection. To them, the shapes of geometry were perfect in a way that was almost holy. In the blocky mass and volume of the cube, the cylinder, and the cone they saw shadows of that greater order to which their lives were dedicated, while the primary colours seemed in their indivisible purity to be the very shades of logic.

Their city then was this; solids and shades set in symmetry. Pyramids in yellow and black, cylinders and cubes

of red, green, blue, spheres of violet, orange, wide white streets moving among the buildings in arcs and angles of pure transparency, the symbol of light shining blindingly in the sun.

Only when a cloud shadow skimmed across the upper face of a cube did the vastness of the city become apparent, and I saw that the edges of these structures could be measured in miles, not metres, that a whole race could live with ease among these huge monuments to logic.

I watched the city for a long time, waiting for some sign that the ship's landing had been noticed, but there was none. No crowds streamed out to welcome it, no robots came to clear the cargo. There was only a sunny wind-blown silence, and, on either side of me, more ships, as empty and deserted as mine.

Nobody answered my shouts. When I went back to the corridor looking for something bright to wave I found that the lights had gone out. The robot in the corridor was lying on its side, its eye dark. All around me the ship was silent and dead.

I dug a rope from the cargo and climbed to the ground. Ordinarily I would not have taken such a risk, swinging like an ungainly spider down the ship's huge flank, but anything was preferable to spending another moment in the eerie darkness of the cargo hold.

The ship had landed in a loading yard, but the machines dotted around it were as dead as the ship itself. The whole world seemed under a spell to which only I was immune. As I walked along the wide white road that led to the city I saw no sign of life, no person, no vehicle, no bird or insect. A few blades of grass moved in the wind, but sluggishly, as if their green blood were turning slowly to stone.

There were no walls around the city. It just began, the long road becoming a broad avenue leading to the central plaza. The buildings towered above me, impossibly huge, but silent. The city was empty. The Kings had gone.

Half way along the avenue towards the cone I had a feeling that made me stop and look around, a sense that somebody was near, watching me, but when I turned there was nothing to see, only the huge and silent city.

And yet, in the quiet, I heard—or thought I heard—the sound of footsteps moving down the empty streets, soft, slow footsteps among the buildings.

Her feet?

I waited, listening, but the noise merged into that of the wind. I ran the last few yards to the great doorless entrance of the central building and stood just inside, gratefully soaking up the feeling of enclosure and protection that it gave me.

The vast proportions of the city were not carried out inside its constructions. There was no spacious foyer in this building, only a cramped hall extending into the heart of the place, and beside me a line of vertical tubes, like lifts without cabins. I looked up the first of them, but its smooth transparency offered no clues.

“Anybody here?”

There was no answer, not even an echo. The clear unmarred floor, the polished perfection of the walls, all argued against the presence of humans here at any time, but I knew that Centre had been inhabited only recently. Somebody had sent the cargo to Dismas, and I was sure she was still here. Perhaps at the top. I stepped into one of the tubes. The air around me crackled for a moment, and I was sucked up like a piece of papery debris.

Level after level went by, giving me glimpses of huge empty floors on which desks and machines were scattered in brightly-lit idleness, of robots disconnected and dead, of corridors and offices, all empty.

At the peak of the cone I found a room where once the Kings had come to look out on their city and their empire. The walls were clearer than glass, seeming to magnify and sharpen vision. I could see down every street, even as far as

the space yard where the ship that had brought me to Centre stood in the midst of a thousand other ships, part of an armada that, against this vast city, was like a doll's fleet. Yet nowhere in the many square miles of the complex of Centre was there a movement.

It was almost as if I had dreamed everything. I tried to picture her, the girl with the roses who played jokes with life and death, but failed completely. When I saw a face or body, it was only a composite of my own images of perfection, a strange creature moving with fluid grace through a haze of perfume. But something in the pattern of my memories denied that she was a fantasy. Her cruelty and dark humour marked her as a person of sharp, real imperfection. I knew she existed—somewhere.

From the upper room I went down into the lower levels that had housed the individual human neurones in this huge nerve centre. Their places were untouched, kept ready by the city against their return. After the first curiosity had subsided I began to notice things. The lamps in their offices had no switches. They never went out. There were no recreation areas, no couches, only desks and hard white chairs. What could they have done here? What task was worth this sort of labour?

I found part of the answer on a lower level. The floor was a maze of computer cabinets, leaving only narrow alleys through which to squeeze. On one of these I found a sheaf of paper clipped to a wide board. The sheets, hundreds of them, were covered in tiny printed figures, but on every page a hundred notations had been made by hand. The same hand. Most of them meant nothing to me, but some were familiar. They were population figures, statistics on changes in structure and content of a society. The walls were covered with similar tables, indexed and coded.

Once I had this clue much of the other material in the building began to make sense. The charts and graphs that lined the wall were all sociological. The machines and the

people who worked them must have been involved in something huge, some sociological problem large enough to dominate the life of an entire race. I looked at the panorama of Centre outside the cone. There was only one problem that would interest a people as logical as the Kings. They wanted to find a pattern, the equation that would make human behaviour intelligible, that would let them predict and control the actions of their subjects.

But I could feel it in every shadow, every machine. They had failed.

However, this didn't explain why they had left Centre. There was one piece of information still missing.

I wandered on through the empty building. In the level below that on which I found the computers the floor was laid out with a different sort of machine. These were fitted with printers designed to transmit and receive information in the form of words rather than figures. Cautiously I walked between the low grey cabinets, reading on the spilled rolls of paper the incomprehensible thoughts of men now gone from this place forever.

The lack of keyboards puzzled me until accidentally I wandered into the field of one machine and its writer began to chatter out frantic meaningless syllables, some of which echoed my own thoughts of a second before.

I experimented, spelling out a few words just by settling them into the front of my mind and visualizing them on the paper. With a sort of horror I read what the machine wrote, then put down the sheet and looked around the room. This had been their telemetry station. The computers that lined it would be connected to printers all over Centre. These machines were the core of their communications system. So perhaps . . .

As I thought the message through I imagined the machines all over Centre whirring into life in their huge but empty rooms, the paper chugging out of them to lie unread and unnoticed on the floor until a robot cleaned it

up; a robot that could not answer my question.

IS ANYBODY THERE?

Somehow I knew she would answer. It was like her to do so. A minute passed. Two. Silence. Then a sudden terrifying sound as the machine whined and words appeared on the paper.

WHO ARE YOU?

NICHOLAS JAKOBS, I wrote. WHO ARE YOU?

EALYN. A pause. HAVE YOU COME TO TAKE ME AWAY? Take her away? NO. YES. I DON'T KNOW. WHAT DO YOU WANT?

WHY DID YOU NOT GO WITH THE OTHERS?

She must think I'm one of her kind, a King. Without considering the question, I gave her the worst possible answer.

I'M NOT ONE OF YOU. I'M HUMAN.

Terror blazed in the sudden crazed spilling of words from the machine.

HUMAN MAN DIE GO AWAYWAYWAY DO NOT TOUCH I DIE YOU

I stood astonished as the paper vomited out at my feet. What did she mean? Human man die? Why did the idea of my mortality terrify her so?

Perhaps because she could not die?

That had to be it. It explained everything. Looking for their pattern, their magic equation, the Kings had taken on themselves the supreme burden, immortality, before realizing they were doomed to fail.

Somewhere below me there was a distant clash of machinery and one of the tubes hummed briefly. She had been there all the time! Hiding in the same building. At the tubes I found nothing, but dimly through the deep well I heard running footsteps downstairs. Now I had to catch her, catch her before she destroyed me, as she must do, a mortal in this world of perfection and deathlessness.

I dropped to the ground level and ran outside. It was

afternoon and the subsiding sun lit Centre and its streets with a slanting golden light that threw elongated shadows. Looking down the avenue along which I had come earlier that day, I saw her in the distance, a figure too far off to be visible except as a disturbance of shadows. She turned a corner and the low sun threw her magnified shadow for a moment on to the wall of a pyramid. It flitted across the yellow blankness like a flash of black lightning, then was gone. I called out to her, but even if she had wanted to hear me the distance was too great. Desperately I set out to follow her.

It was sunset when I reached the port. Behind the ship in which I had come to Centre the fleet stretched endlessly under the gaudy sky of dusk, ranks of silhouette bitten into the red and orange sunset. This was more than ever the world of machines, of metal giants and the robots, their servants. Yet, though they were metal and saw us only dimly, irritating variables in their logical existence, she had disturbed them, my lady of the roses. I could follow her path by the red eyes of the robots that circled angrily in the dark at the base of the ships, watching for a threat of which they had no real knowledge. Doom hummed in the air as I hurried past them.

Beyond the silent forest of ships the field opened out, leaving space for the great vessels, the inter-universe ships. For the first time I saw that this area was almost empty, though there were signs that ships had been here not long ago. Once there had been hundreds of them lying like fat queen bees in their hive, cosseted by the robots. Now only one remained, a ship made huge by its isolation, as lonely as a beached whale on a storm-swept shore.

Robots scurried around the vessel, pouring into it the fluids and materials on which it fed. The ship began to light up until it was like a city glowing at dusk. Then, easily, with the motion of a rising animal, it lifted into the sunset, drifting down the night wind towards the ocean of stars.

Freed of earth, it swam towards the sky like a fish diving into deep and empty seas, and Ealyn went with it. I had lost her. We would never meet, never speak.

The ship hovered, standing high above the city, its sides lit by the fire of a sun that, at those heights, was still visible. Perhaps I could reach it. But some sense warned me that if I was to go it must be then, immediately. The air was filled with a darkness that was only partly due to the setting sun. I seemed to smell roses again, staining the air with the sweet scent of midnight flowers.

There were ships all around me, but none of them small enough to navigate alone. I hunted among them until I found a small scout lifted on blocks for some minor repair. The sky was darkening as I tore back the covers and groped in the cockpit, fumbling with controls that were alien to me, even subtly frightening. The motors jarred into life, then stopped. I tried again, desperate to be in the air, to be anywhere but on Centre.

I don't know what weapon she used to destroy the city. It was a simple thing; no more than a thin red beam that probed down through the dusk and touched the surface of Centre somewhere in the heart of the city. But where it touched, the buildings and streets, the ground, even the air itself began to rot and decay. The beam ate energy as quickly as it could be supplied, and one by one the huge and perfect buildings of Centre faded to hills of grey ash that crumbled in the wind.

Like a plague the circle of death expanded through the city, and as it spread down the wide avenues the Kings' vast monuments sagged, dissolving like sandcastles before the tide. Within minutes the city was gone, but the circle continued to spread, reaching out for the field and for me.

I tried frantically to start the scout, forcing switches and knobs in a desperate last effort. With reluctance the panel lit up and I set the motors to maximum thrust. The black stain had reached the field's edge. Ships began to collapse

like worm-eaten trees as it reduced them to columns of dust. I was blinded by a hot driving storm blown from the city. The air had begun to yield, rotting into a hurricane that surrounded me. Labouring in the deteriorating air the ship lurched upwards.

Behind me, Centre was rotting away, its plains becoming dust deserts, its mountains piles of ash, but I ignored everything in my devotion to reaching the ship, and Ealyn. She had destroyed this world, but not me. No. We were destined to meet. I fought upwards like a drowning man struggling to the surface of the sea. Once I lost sight of the ship and battled through the storm with growing terror until it loomed up in front of me, a death wreathed in veils of black dust.

The ship hung over me like a moon, then became a cliff along which I steered, searching for an opening that I knew must be there. If once it moved I would splinter myself on this metal reef, but it hung still, absorbed in the death of Centre. Scouts had used this ship before. There must be receiving ports. I had been once along the side and was becoming more desperate each second when I saw the thing I was looking for, a black opening to a tunnel that slanted down into the vessel. I hauled the ship around and, coasting along the craft's broad side, steered myself into the darkness.

There was nothing in the landing lock nor in the halls that entered it. Except for the hum of the ship under my feet I could have imagined myself still on Centre, alone in the empty city with its machines and ghosts. Beyond the first corridors there were more, branching and twining like the intestines of a huge animal. But on the floor a glowing map told me where I was going, and I followed a thin thread of scarlet through the silent halls towards the main control-room.

Lift tubes and stairs took me down endless levels,

moving ways and catwalks carried me across miles of floor, but all the time I followed the red line, hypnotized by the endless unwinding of its length, until suddenly it dived into the transparent floor and disappeared. I looked around the place, a room packed with panels and machines. This was the main control-room, but she was not here.

Then I smelt roses again, a scent drifting through the passage that led to another room, and I followed that to where she was.

At the end of the corridor a doorway of darkness marked the beginning of this, the last room. The perfume of roses flowed from it like a sweet warm breath, and in the centre of it I sensed a movement, slow and sleepy.

"Ealyn," I called softly.

There was no answer.

I stepped over the threshold into this dark place—and fell into the stars.

It was an observation room, a transparent blister on the wall of the ship. Spidery catwalks laced the chamber, but these were unnecessary. She had cut off the gravity and floated among them, watching the stars and the black cinder of Centre below.

Drifting quietly into the chamber I felt something brush my face. It was a rose, white this time, floating against the star-points in scented silence. Beyond it were more of them, some white, others like soft red wounds in the air.

I looked down at the one I had come to find. She was naked. A cloud of long black hair floated about her head and golden body, the strands separate, motionless.

"Ealyn."

Her movement was an instant animal contraction, a twitch that turned her slim body and, driving with her legs braced against a metal rail, launched it upwards at me. I was ready for her teeth and nails but the knife in her hand was out of sight until too late. I screamed as it sliced into

me, two tearing jagged thrusts before I beat her into unconsciousness.

I laid her back against the warm pillow of air and gathered up the hair that had been flung into a knotted net. Below us the ruin of Centre rolled like a corpse in the sea. I looked down at the one who had killed this world and me, my dark lady of the roses whom I had followed so far, who had toyed with my life and now had taken it from me. Her body floated in the warm darkness, the smooth hairless figure of a twelve-year-old girl.

I smoothed the hair again and clasped her arms across the half-formed breasts.

"Sleep," I said. "Go to sleep."

I can only guess why she was left behind. Perhaps she hid, hoping to create some mischief before she was caught. Or they may have forgotten her. When she wakes I will ask her, if I am still alive.

Where there is no gravity a man dies slowly and without pain. Life drips out of him in a warm even flow so that there is no sharp terminator, only a thickening twilight smoothing into sleep. Around me I see blood, fat round rubies of it drifting among the flowers. A white rose touches one, then is suddenly red as if life had flowed into it from my body, and I am well content that in this way at least I will be remembered. To have searched is the best thing, the thing that makes it all worth while. My dreams can die in peace now that they have found a home in her my dark lady

dark and stars and roses

dark



# SYNTH

by

KEITH ROBERTS

*It was going to be the most sensational divorce case in the history of the Supreme Court of Judicature, for the co-respondent was the beautiful Megan Winthrop—and Megan (M.E.G. 19/02) was a synthetic woman!*

*A new and fascinating plot idea from one of Britain's most promising writers.*



## SYNTH

THE apartment was small, as all twenty-second-century apartments had perforce to be, and looked out from its fifty-storey height over the panorama of roofs and canyons that was the latter-day London. On one near roof a spark of colour lodged against a grey mansard showed where a solitary sunbather took advantage of the lull between dawn and First Shift; the rest of the buildings were deserted, stark and detailed in the still light. The geometric wilderness stretched to horizon haze; Earth once had many things to show more fair.

The windows of the flatlet boasted movable frames, a rare anachronism these days, the casements stood ajar admitting the nearly smokeless morning air. On the sill beyond, sparrows chattered. With all England a built-over mass of concrete and steel these creatures, most unattractive of birds, had managed to survive.

At the windows, arms folded and frowning faintly, stood a girl. She was tall and delicately proportioned, with the rare swaying curve to the back that gives a woman's body litheness. She wore a short belted robe of white towelling; her yellow-brown hair, still tousled from sleep, hung across her eyes. The eyes were long-tailed, and combined with the sleek angle of the jaw to produce that facial type sometimes described by the fanciful as catlike. The girl was still enough not to disturb the birds; if their noise penetrated her consciousness, she gave no sign of it.

Her attention seemed totally drawn to the sunbather. As she watched the figure on the roof it sat up, waved an arm at the distant window of the flat. She acknowledged the gesture with the tiniest inclination of her head then she turned away, still frowning slightly, face otherwise ex-

pressionless. She started, silently, to fix her bed. As she moved her feet whispered against concrete, raising faint moth-sounds from its bareness.

The flat was unusual in other respects apart from its lack of furnishing. No pictures relieved the walls, the little tri-dee epics that had recently become the rage in Town; and there was no calorie box, the omnipresent chute through which CentSup and their subsidiaries delivered packaged meals to half the country. The lack of eating arrangements was in fact complete; not even an ancient infrared grill was in evidence, and the wall cupboards lining the kitchenette alcove were empty of glass and plasticware.

The girl swung the coverlet across the bed and folded the top sheet back against the starkness of the pillow. She crossed the room to the shower, shrugged off the housecoat, and bathed, soaping herself vigorously. Hot air hoses, sliding from the ceiling, dried her; she stepped out, dressed carefully in a white *cheongsam* and sat at a wall mirror to work some tidiness into her hair. By the time she was finished the sparrows had done with their squabbling and flown, and traffic sounds were floating up to the room from the sprawling city below.

She planned a switch. The first of the day's news bulletins began to unroll itself, the letters of the announcements standing out in startling colour from the wall trivvyscreen. The girl watched a time impassively; then the switch was flicked again, the images vanished in a quick electronic popping. She pulled from under the bed a plastic grip; rummaging inside, she produced an old book. Very old it must have been, for its binding was of leather. She opened it to a mark, tucked the bookmark inside the cover, and began to read.

When her wrist chrono gave her a quarter of ten she stood up, flicking at the slight creases in her dress. The book was restored to its place of concealment; she picked up handbag and gloves, stared a last time round the apart-

ment. She walked across and closed the windows then stepped through the door, hearing the lock wards shuffle to a fresh configuration behind her. At the end of the corridor was a vaclift. She entered it and was whirled down in a matter of seconds to the level of the street.

She touched her wrist to call a cab. The vehicle waited bumbling and fizzing, tapping its antennae impatiently while she eased herself into the passenger cubicle. She spoke her destination to the intercom, leaned back to let the seat cushioning take the acceleration. The car picked up the control rails buried in the road surface, U-turned, and swooped for the first intersect a couple of hundred yards ahead.

The journey through London's confusion of traffic took some time. The cab finally slowed to a stop and she got out, feeding a token absently to the extruded box of the Autoconductor. She stood in bright sunlight, looking round slowly. In front of her was a plaza. In its centre, beside the darkened swaths of the cabways, fountains played; around them a considerable crowd had already collected. Over the people rose a huge pale block of building, more than classically severe in design, with square windows set in geometric rows. On its forehead the place wore like a caste-mark a colossal statue, a triumph of the rediscovered Cubist movement; Justice, holding aloft a golden sword and scales, proclaimed the New Bailey, greatest criminal court in the land. The girl's destination was nearer, on her side of the square. Similarly vast and white, but ornamented; the Supreme Court of Judicature, hub of the country's administration of civil law. She squared her shoulders, a tiny reflexive gesture, and began to walk towards it, heels tinkling on the bright hardness of the pathway.

For a moment she was unobserved; then the people saw her. Shouting began; cameras were lifted, splashing back on their users her image in cubes of coloured gel; she saw a

trivvyrig airborne and swooping, blunt nose, aimed at her head. The crowd broke, beginning to run. State Troopers reached her first, formed round her a phalanx that butted its way through the jostling of the mob. There was much noise. More Troopers, arms linked in the old fashion, made a path for her to the entrance of the building; she stepped through the doors into a further tumult. Reporters boiled about, shouting questions and waving microphones; trivvy-rigs darted from every side. She closed her mind to the uproar; her guards hurried her across the entrance hall and into a lift that spun her up into the high precincts of the place.

She sat in a small room, grey-painted, plain except for the grille of an airvent placed behind the solitary desk. At the desk, a woman regarded her sharply before consulting the lit panel in front of her and a sheaf of forms.

"Name?"

"Megan Wingrove." The girl's voice was soft, with a trace of huskiness.

The other tapped a stylus irritably on a plastic sheet. "Identification, please."

"I'm sorry. M.E.G. one nine, stroke zero two."

All this was formality. "Tag?"

Megan searched quickly in her handbag, lifted the little metallic disc and held it forward. The other sniffed. "Put it on please. You know the rules."

"I'm sorry," said the girl again. She slipped the dogtag on to her wrist, tightening the thong.

"Your place of manufacture?"

"Birmingham."

"Year?"

"Two one seven two."

"Thank you." The stylus pointed. "Wait in the next room, will you? You'll be told when your case opens."

"Thank you . . ." Megan rose self-consciously, hips swaying a trifle, walked through the white-painted door. Beyond

was a line of chairs; she sat down, fingers playing with the lace at her wrist, eyes on the ceiling indicator as she waited her turn.

The case of *Davenport v. Davenport* would have raised enough dust to satisfy even the trivvy magnates without the astounding disclosure by Mrs. Ira Amanda Davenport of the nature of the offence allegedly committed by her husband. For a famous painter, a delineator of the crowned and uncrowned heads of royalty, a master of egg tempera and chocolate boxes, to be involved in divorce proceedings was spectacular stuff; for the co-respondent to be openly named was better; but—and the full impact only hit an astounded newsworld after urgent consultations with the staff of the reconstituted Somerset House—for the girl, Megan Wingrove, M.E.G. 19/02, to be a *Synth* . . . why, that was past all belief. The Davenport mansion, a steel and chromium pile located not far from the Haymarket on Level Three, was besieged *instantly*; but nothing more was forthcoming. Ira of course had long since taken herself off to the home of understanding friends and Henry Aloysius Davenport, A.R.C.A., R.A., eschewed comment; or rather his lawyer eschewed comment, Mr. Davenport himself being unavailable to the public gaze. In lieu of hard news, the rumours grew; so fast and so far that Lord Chief Justice Hayward in his opening remarks for the case felt in duty bound to dispel some at least of the fog surrounding the affair.

"I think it only proper," said the Judge, "before beginning an investigation of the business before us, to present to the court several aspects of the matter which may in the somewhat unfortunate enthusiasm shown by the . . . ah . . popular organs, have become distorted; and to disabuse the minds of all present of certain irrelevancies which would appear to have attached themselves to it.

"There is no question of the responsibility of the Syn-

thetic, Megan Wingrove, in the eyes of the law. The charge preferred by plaintiff against her husband Mr. Henry Aloysius Davenport is of mental cruelty, and is acceptable under the appropriate section of the Divorce Amendment Act of 1992 and subsequent Acts. In so far as the compliance of the said Megan Wingrove is concerned, the court must decide during and pursuant to this hearing what proportion of blame is to be attached.

"These facts I expect to be firmly borne in mind by you all, and wish specifically to bring them to the attention of counsels for the plaintiff and for the defendant. Gentlemen, am I understood?"

Mr. Neville Martensson, for the plaintiff, and Mr. Richard Blakeney, K.C., for the defendant, bowed in unison.

"Very well," said the Lord Chief Justice. "Then I feel we may begin. . . ."

Megan, sitting unobtrusively to one side of the court, had let her attention wander. She'd seen the interior of the great hall often enough on the trivvyscreens, one channel was permanently reserved for its proceedings; but she had never before set foot in it, not even in the public galleries. She looked round at them now, at the long lines of faces, many of them turned towards her. Below, the floor of the court was dominated by the Judge's bench and the jury box; British justice still insisted on leaving the ultimate authority in the hands of amateurs. Facing each other across a floor of pale orange wood were the desks of the opposing counsels; beyond them was the railed-off body of the court where witnesses and the more favoured of the audience waited expectantly. Imitation sunlight, generated by lines of high-powered lamps, flooded through clerestory windows; the whole effect was bright, almost gay. It reminded Megan of a stage set rather than a place for the sober dispensing of justice. In a sense of course it was a set; the trivvyrigs were everywhere, whirring and humming,

swooping on their near-invisible supports of telescoping rods. She could see their operators, intent behind a long glass panel set just beneath the roof.

She was recalled to the business in hand by Mr. Martensson rising to open for the plaintiff. The counsel was a short, square man, inclined to dumpiness, with pale eyes and a small red vee of a mouth that he kept tightly pursed imparting to his face an oddly prim expression. He stated his case briskly; he had a habit while talking of rubbing his hands over and over in a faintly sinister way, as if washing with invisible soap. Megan watched him, fascinated.

The facts of the matter were relatively simple. For some time Henry Davenport had been proclaimed among the top social set at least as the country's leading portrait painter. Five years previously he had married Ira, *née* Stowey, in one of the season's biggest weddings. Eighteen months later and several million dollars richer he had ordered from the Birmingham branch of InterNatMech (Great Britain) a Synthetic for general duties in the house as servant, maid-of-all-work and companion to his wife during his frequent and lengthy lecture tours abroad. The early evidence was rapidly dealt with; an official of InterNatMech confirmed the sale and delivery, while various other interested parties testified to the life of amity hitherto led by the Davenports. Martensson made his points quickly, wasting no words, and there were no interruptions from the defence.

Some months after the arrival of the Synth the first signs of friction had begun to appear. Henry it seemed had started to spend more and more time with his synthetic servant, preferring Meg's company to that of his lawful spouse. Many nights the two passed companionably by the romantic light of a fire, sitting chatting and reading poetry. The remonstrances of the unhappy Mrs. Davenport had fallen on deaf ears; then had come the evening of July 14, just three months ago now, and the great Incident. At this point counsel for the plaintiff called Mrs. Davenport to the

stand; and the Lord Chief Justice, with a fine sense of timing, adjourned the court for lunch.

"Mrs. Davenport," said Martensson, resuming his case in an air of hushed expectancy, "perhaps you would like to tell me in your own words exactly what happened on that occasion?"

Ira, a rather overweight blonde from whom the best efforts of prosthetic makeup technicians had been unable to remove a faintly overblown air, sniffed and touched her nostrils with a balled-up handkerchief. "It was . . . very terrible," she said in a low voice. "I . . . I shall never forget it, not to my dying day. . . ."

"Yes. Do please go on."

"I . . . knew there was something wrong. As soon as I entered the house. I'd been staying with friends, I'd returned unexpectedly. The . . . atmosphere, I've always been most sensitive to atmosphere. Acutely sensitive. The . . . house was silent. Quiet as a grave. I . . . I was concerned, I didn't put on any lights. You see I knew something was terribly wrong . . . I went to my husband's room. He was not there. I . . . didn't know what to do . . ."

"Did you think of calling the police?"

"I . . . the scandal, the outrage. . . . We . . . had a position, Mr. Martensson. You understand . . ."

"Quite, quite," said the counsel sympathetically. "What did you in fact do, Mrs. Davenport?"

Henry Davenport, dapper, bearded, and clad in one of his famous cherry-coloured suits, began to exhibit strong signs of distress. He fidgeted in his seat, casting anxious glances at his counsel. The symptoms were not overlooked; a trivvyrig glided to him quietly, transfixing the artist with the cold eye of its lens. Richard Blakeney seemed blissfully unaware of the byplay; he persisted in his attempts to balance a stylus on the tip of one finger.

"I . . . waited," said Ira. "I daren't even . . . call out. I was

having a terrible thought, I don't know what put it into my head. I . . . went to . . . that creature's room." She indicated Megan with a flick of one varnished nail. "I . . . I opened the door. Quietly, so as not to disturb . . . it. If it was sleeping . . ."

"And was it sleeping, Mrs. Davenport?"

"It was not. It was . . . lying on the bed. *With my husband. . .*"

Excited hubbub from the court. The Judge rapped peremptorily for order.

"And what did you do then?"

"I . . . I screamed. I think I screamed. The shock, the outrage . . . frankly I can't remember. . . ."

Richard gave up his operations with the stylus and narrowed his eyes at the witness. Across the court Megan sat watching quietly, hands lying in her lap.

Martensson prompted smoothly. "What happened then, Mrs. Davenport? Try to tell the court."

"The . . . thing, the Synth . . . sat up. Its blouse was unbuttoned down the front, I saw that clearly. And my husband . . ." Ira put a hand to her forehead. "The rest's gone. Just a blank. I'm sorry."

"That's quite all right," said Mr. Martensson. "As the court appreciates, the whole affair was a great shock to you. I don't think I have any more questions for the moment."

Richard Blakeney jackknifed himself to his feet. "Permission to examine the witness, M'Lord?"

"Granted."

The counsel approached the stand, leaned against it while he contemplated the ceiling of the courtroom. In physical appearance he was Martensson's complete opposite. He was tall and thin, inclined almost to droopiness; his face, with the wide mouth and long, half-veiled eyes, was that of a ballet dancer. His opponent, outwardly cocksure, watched him speculatively. The brain behind

that sleepy mask had cost more cases than Martensson cared to remember.

Richard's eyes, roving quietly, stopped at Megan. He smiled, while she stared back uncertainly. He scratched an ear, harrumphed a couple of times, and turned at last to the witness. "Er . . . good afternoon, Mrs. Davenport. . . ."

Titters of amusement. Judge Hayward rapped for order. Ira stared at the K.C., truculent and a little tear-stained.

"Er . . . yes," said Richard. "Mrs. Davenport, have you ever been in a court of law before?"

"Objection!" Martensson bounced to his feet. "The question is irrelevant. Counsel is trying to intimidate the witness."

The Lord Chief Justice raised enquiring eyebrows at Blakeney. Richard looked vaguely troubled. "On the contrary, M'Lord," he said. "The question was designed to assist Mrs. Davenport. I was about to remark that witness need have no cause for concern as long as she answers clearly and concisely what is asked her."

Judge Hayward looked annoyed. "Well, Mr. Martensson?"

"Objection withdrawn. . . ." Martensson sat back sulkily. Richard clucked at him faintly; he always liked to score a quick first point off his opponent. He turned back to the witness. "Mrs. Davenport, on the night you described, the night of July fourteen, you claim to have been thrown into a state of shock by the discovery of your husband and Miss Wingrove together. Yet you noticed one apparently minor detail with great clarity; the unbuttoned blouse of Miss Wingrove. Is this not remarkable?"

"I . . . no. The little things, the d-details . . . they stand in one's mind. They're often the only things one does remember. . . ."

"Yes," said Richard. "Quite, quite. . . . Now the blouse you say was dishevelled. To what extent, Mrs. Davenport?"

"I . . . I told you. It was undone. . . ."

"Were the girl's breasts uncovered?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Come, Mrs. Davenport, you saw this with great clarity. It was the one detail that burned itself, as it were, on your mind. Were her breasts exposed?"

"I . . ."

"Were *they*, Mrs. Davenport?"

"No," said the woman sullenly. "They were covered when she got up. But they hadn't been, they hadn't been. . . ."

"That, Mrs. Davenport, is an assumption that I think is unwarrantable. Are you in a position to prove your assertion?"

"Well . . . use your imagination. It was *obvious* what had been going on. . . ."

"With your imagination already working at capacity," said Richard sweetly, "any attempts on my part would I feel be superfluous."

"Objection! Counsel is intimidating the witness. His last remark constitutes an open accusation of false testimony."

"That, M'Lord," said Richard, "was nothing of the sort. I merely wished to establish the degree of dishevelment noticed by the witness, and to point out that what had happened prior to her entering the room can scarcely be known to her now. Or maybe it can. You claim you are a Sensitive, Mrs. Davenport. Do you perhaps possess second sight as well?"

"Objection! . . ."

"Question withdrawn," said the counsel, hearing ripples of laughter in the audience. "Now to proceed, Mrs. Davenport. Did you on entering your maid's room notice any other signs of disorder? Apart from the blouse which we seem to have established was only slightly disarranged?"

"She was lying in an abandoned attitude," snarled the witness. "Her thighs were exposed. . . ."

"Her thighs were exposed," said Richard pensively. He stared round at a vista of thighs, all bared in accordance with the dictates of fashion. Mrs. Davenport, dressed herself in the season's highest mode, reddened and twitched her skirt across her knees. Richard smiled. "Is it your opinion then," he asked pleasantly, "that bared legs are an infallible sign of depravity?"

"Objection! . . ."

"To ease the mind of my learned colleague," said Blakeney, "I will not press the witness to answer that question. Now Mrs. Davenport, before we leave this apparently delicate subject, were there any other signs of dishevelment noted by you? So far we have I think one slightly untidy blouse. Hardly conclusive proof of adultery, you must admit. . . ."

"His hair," said Ira, groping. "My husband's hair. It was all . . . disarranged. All over his face. . . ."

"To what cause do you ascribe that?"

"She . . . it . . . had been stroking it. Running its f-fingers through it. A *machine*! . . ." She shuddered, chewing at her lip.

Richard smiled again benignly. "Mrs. Davenport," he said, "not a hundred yards from this building is an establishment, often frequented by myself, where the payment of a small sum secures certain services. A machine will wash and shave me; it will shampoo my hair; and to my shame be it admitted, *it will massage my scalp*. Twice a week I return to my Gomorrah; I luxuriate in blackest sin, shoulder to shoulder frequently with highly placed and respected officers of this city, while a machine strokes my hair. . . ." He walked off quietly. Half way to his seat he shook his head sorrowfully. "She stroked his hair," he said, as if to himself. "*Stroked his hair. . . .*"

He reached his desk and turned, waiting for the amusement to die down. "On a point of information, Mrs. Davenport," he said, "far from losing coherence, you

would appear on the occasion under discussion to have been remarkably . . . er . . . fluent." He drew from his pocket a slip of paper, squinted at it painfully. "Did you not call your husband . . . 'a lecher, a louse, a two-bit fornicator . . .' You also said, unless my information is incorrect, 'You crafty little bastard, I'll get a hundred thousand a year for this. . . .' The rest is written down, M'Lord. I'd like to pass it to you for perusal. . . ."

Laughter broke in a wave.

Before releasing his victim Richard asked permission to recall Mrs. Davenport during his defence. The matter was protested vigorously by Martensson; but the counsel for the plaintiff was overruled by the Lord Chief Justice. Blakeney sat down reasonably satisfied.

Other evidence followed; the testimony of the State Troopers called to the house by the distracted Mrs. Davenport, statements from a doctor and a psychiatrist and from the officer in charge of the Sector Station where Megan had temporarily been lodged. Martensson had a solid case, and he made the most of it; Richard, sitting dreamily toying with the stylus, watched the black clouds gather.

"And there can be little doubt," said the counsel for the plaintiff, winding up his attack on the second day, "that Henry Davenport did in fact inflict the severest mental pain on his wife. By introducing into his hitherto happy establishment the person of the Synthetic Megan Wingrove he deliberately instituted a situation intolerable to his partner; its culmination, and his disgraceful and abnormal conduct, you have already heard described. I can only ask you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, to recommend the strongest measures in dealing with this affair; an affair that has already cost an innocent woman more than money can repay in terms of suffering and very real grief."

He turned triumphantly to the bench. "M'Lord," he said, "the case for the plaintiff rests. . . ."

Court was adjourned for the remainder of the day.

On the third morning Blakeney opened for the defendant.

"The court cannot fail to have noticed," he said, "that despite the injunctions given at the start of these proceedings learned counsel for the plaintiff has seen fit to base his case totally on the affair of Megan Wingrove; he has sought to prove, unsuccessfully I might add, that an illicit relationship did exist and that adultery did in fact take place. The defence feels compelled to answer and finally demolish these charges. We shall show beyond reasonable doubt that such a state of affairs did not and could not exist; and we shall prove beyond all question that the accusations that have brought us here are at best the imaginings of an overwrought and highly-strung woman, and at worst deliberate machinations dictated by vindictiveness and avarice. M'Lord, have I your permission to proceed?"

Judge Hayward nodded after a moment's consideration. "Yes, Mr. Blakeney, you have."

"Thank you, M'Lord," said Richard easily. "Then for my first witness I wish to call Mr. Pieter van Mechelren, President of InterNatMech, Amsterdam."

A buzz of speculation. The parent company of InterNatMech was world-famous; it held exclusive rights of all processes connected with the production of Synths, and was one of the wealthiest business houses in Europe. To get their President on the case in person Blakeney had evidently been pulling some very powerful strings.

The man who took the stand was burly and dark-haired; his eyes were big and brown in a plump, smooth-skinned face. He looked like a moderately successful market gardener. Richard knew better.

The counsel opened smartly. "Your name is Pieter van Mechelren?"

"It is." The voice was deep, with a faint guttural trace of accent.

"And you are the President of InterNatMech of Holland?"

"Yes."

"Would you describe yourself as qualified to give opinions on the characteristics and inherent capabilities of the beings known as Synthetics?"

Pieter grinned slowly. "Jus' about, I reckon."

Richard consulted his notes. "I believe you do yourself an injustice," he said. "You hold degrees in biochemistry, physics, and physiology, you are an honorary member of the Royal Society and the Royal Institution, of the Dutch Society of Physiomechanics and of the American Institute of Bioengineering. You hold a chair in Cybernetics at the University of Gröningen; and you are generally accepted to be the world's leading authority on all phases of the construction and operation of Synths. Am I not correct?"

Van Mechelren wagged his hands deprecatingly. "There are maybe some diff'rent opinions on that."

Richard smiled. "I think yours, Mr. van Mechelren, will satisfy this court." He indicated Megan, sitting a few yards from him. "Tell me, did your firm market the figure you see here?"

"Yes, indirectly. She was produced under license about three years back by InterNatMech Great Britain, at their installation in Birmingham."

"I see. Now Mr. van Mechelren, you've heard the evidence already given in court. What is your professional opinion of it with regard to your product?"

"Wi' regard to our product?" Pieter spread thick-fingered hands. "A load of hossfeathers, a'm afraid."

There were sniggers.

Richard nodded. "I see. Now before coming down to detail, perhaps you'd give the court a brief outline of the nature of Synthetic humans. A short history of their development if you like. I want everybody here to be fully conversant with the subject."

Pieter shrugged. "Would tak' a bit of time. Is a big subject."

"Briefly then."

"Briefly? Well, I try..." The Dutchman frowned thoughtfully. "Th' idea of a Synth is mebbe ver' old. After all the Cretans had a guy called Talos, used to frighten the Hell out of 'em 'cause he was made of brass. There is no time in the history of the race when we've bin without a robot of some kind. Something ... automatic, something ticking, turning, singing..." He rocked his hands, miming the actions of machinery. "Engines that could go where we could not, because we were too big or too small; taste fire that was too warm for us, ice that was too cold; think faster, move faster, fly in the air, burrow through the sea... Always machines, better an' better, more and more perfect robots for us to use. Only robot isn' a good name for the li'l girl here. Name comes from two hundred years back, an old Czech play. Robot, mechanical worker. She isn' mechanical. She's a Synth..."

"How long have Synths themselves been in existence?"

Van Mechelren shrugged his broad shoulders. "Long, long time. Sometimes a' like to think, ever' machine we ever made, that was a part of them. Hundreds o' years they took, bein' born. A' could give names, you know; Holstein, Rigby, Capotek; but they don' mean nothing. Is no ... date, no time you can set down and say *dere*, th' first Synth. They jus' came along, was a continuous process. Of ... growth, development; a li'l bit here, another there... Go back two centuries, there were computers. These were some of th' ancestors..."

Richard nodded. "But computers were, and occasionally still are, bulky affairs. How did they develop into the figure we see in front of us?"

"By simplification," said the Dutchman. "By the transistor supplanting the valve, being supplanted in its turn; always simpler, easier, quicker. That way we always grow

up, we get smart. Like the petrol engine. Was a Hell of a thing. Wit' diesel, easier. Turbines; nothin' to 'em. One day, who can say? Antigrav; nothin' to that at-all. Li'l guy wit' moons an' stars on his hat wave a wand, *presto* . . . right back to de start for us."

He held up a sleeve. "Look. Once was glass an' metal. To mak' a computer then, a brain, needed all steel an' wire. Now see, I tak' two threads. From my jacket will do fine. So I treat dem, so. . . . Now I pass through a current. In the threads, a change. Their resistance alters. To a further current, it will be greater. This is the start. This is memory.

"The li'l girl there, she has a head of cottonwool. Or what you call the stuff, candyfloss. . . . But ver' special candyfloss. The Wolfenden cerebral matrix, developed in this country fifty years ago. Intelligence; memory, extrapolation, decision, you know what it is? A function of number of cells, hookups between 'em. Nothin' difficult. So you spin a wire, ver' fine, put him in a resistant jacket. Then a thousand, just alike. A million. Ten million. Hook 'em up sideways, crossways, ever' way. You put a microscope on a Wolfenden matrix, you got chicken wire. Thousands, thousands o' layers, all balled together. There's your brain. It gets easy, it gets small. You mak' the body the same way; legs, arms, the muscles there, all easy, all small. It tak's years; but you keep tryin', you get there. You make a figure, a woman. You got a Synth. . . ."

"Well, it still sounds a very complicated process to me."

"To understand is simple," said the Dutchman, wagging his head. "But to make . . . in truth, it is not easy. Not easy at all."

"Now this girl," said Richard, "with her rather pretty candyfloss brain. What drives her, what makes her move?"

"Same as makes you an' me move," said van Mechelren. "She's a mass o' muscle, tendon, all packed in. Only she

don' eat for energy, she gets her push-an'-pull another way. She synthesizes, from sunlight."

"Like a plant, in other words?"

"Yah, so. But better'n a plant. A plant's imperfect, needs th' soil. A plant *converts*, she *collects*. A walkin' solar battery, she is. The skin, the hair. . . . She loves the sun, she'll bathe there all day long. She don' need no food. She don' stick her feet in de earth for salt."

"So Synthetic figures are in fact dependent on the sun for their energy."

"Ah, you see. Ideally, yes. But you shut one in a box she'll get sleepy soon, curl up. Go dormant. In a room, a city, is the same. So she can recharge other ways, if she needs. Sometimes at night, when she sleeps."

"Tell us about this business of a sleeping period, Mr. van Mechelren. Is it important it coincides so closely with the human cycle?"

"No, not at all. Same way it don' matter she got two arms, two legs, or ten. We could build 'em any way we like. But people jus' prefer having things around that act like them, look like them. Nest o' wires an' eyes sits up an' says Daddy, they get worried. Is crazy but is true. So . . . things like dat." He waved his hand at Megan, a queer, sharp little gesture that attracted her eyes instantly, and grinned. "We prefer 'em that way too. . . ."

"How many Synths are produced in the course of a year?"

Van Mechelren frowned. "Oh . . . two, three dozen at th' outside. No more."

"Then the population of these people is in fact quite small."

"Ver' small. After all, they come a bit expensive."

"Of course. I think the popular idea is of some sort of assembly line. This is incorrect."

"Ya. . . ." Pieter scowled. "Popular idea, I seen that. Here an assembly line, there another. De hands go on, plonk . . .

de heads, bonk . . . like makin' automobiles. Is not like that at all. Is like a . . . hospital, more. A' wish you could see. Jus' one we work on, at a time. And careful, so careful. . . . This mus' be right, an' that; no flaws, not anywhere. Otherwise she jus' don' go. . . . Even the skin, the flesh. Grown so carefully. . . . Is a ver' long job."

"Grown, you say?"

"Ya. Grown." The Dutchman's eyes glittered with amusement. "Is a hydrocarbon base, long-chain molecules. It grows. . . ."

"I see. Well, you make these people sound very human. Are they human, Mr. van Mechelren?"

"Ach, no. Never. Wit' humans . . . they get sick, they die sometime. They get mean, Hell, sometimes they have a war. They have laws for each other, an' courts to try mak' 'em work." He glanced round humorously. "Wit' these people, never. They don' need no laws. They don' get mad, cut each other up. They know only one thing. Obey a human, when he talks. That's what we teach 'em, right from the start. Is a machine that drips it into 'em, ever' fibre of the brain, till they can't forget, not ever. They're not human, for damn sure. Not robot either. They're Synths. . . ."

"Thank you," said Richard. "Now you've heard already, in the course of these proceedings, various allegations levelled at the . . . ah . . . Synthetic, Megan Wingrove. How do you rate them, technically and professionally?"

'Like a' said. Hossfeathers." Pieter started to grin. "Why don' they sue de sideboard for sittin' there? Or arrest the trivvybox for attempted rape? Man, I never heard one thing the half as crazy. . . ."

"It is impossible then for a Synth to behave in such a way as to bring mental suffering to a human? Or to connive at such behaviour?"

"Is crazy. The human suffers, the fault is in dem. Maybe it hurts 'em to see the sun come up, they want the world to

be dark. Is not the fault of de sun. . . . You know sometimes a' think," said van Mechelren, "a'like to get hold of a few of these humans. We put 'em through the mill, tie 'em on our squeakbox a couple of days, they better for it. One Hell of a sight."

"Yes, quite. Now returning to details, we've heard an accusation of immorality levelled against Megan Wingrove. How do you react to this?"

Van Mechelren reacted by rumbling with laughter. "Man," he said, "how's she goin' to be immoral? What wit'?"

"I'm asking you that, sir."

"There is no way," said the Dutchman quietly. "No way at all."

"In fact you are unable to take the charge seriously."

"I tak' it serious all right," said Pieter darkly. "But not like that. I think somewhere . . . is a bad smell of fish."

At this point counsel for the plaintiff ejaculated something angrily. The doubts as to what Mr. Martensson actually said were never finally resolved; but a reporter sitting close behind his desk claimed, possibly with more optimism than accuracy, that the remark terminated with the phrase *Venus aversa*. It was enough to send a generation of newshounds scurrying for Sir Richard Burton and the *Kama Sutra*; the results of their investigations were spectacular to say the least.

The Dutchman's evidence closed the session for the morning and Blakeney promptly requested, and was granted, a recess till the following day. As soon as he was released from the stand van Mechelren walked over to where Megan was sitting by herself. He hooked a chair from beside the wall and squatted across it, arms on the backrest, chin on his hands. "Hey, magnificent," he said, grinning. "How's ever' li'l spurwheel?"

She looked at him startled, then began to grin back. It was the first time she'd smiled in court. A moment later

Mr. Martensson, clearing the papers from his desk, glanced up and scowled. Richard, van Mechelren, and the Synth were in earnest consultation; he saw Megan lift a slim leg, tapping the knee and rotating the ankle as she made some little complaint about the joint.

"Hey, look," said the Dutchman, still grinning, "a' tell you what. If you can stand to watch a fat man eat, I tak' you both to lunch. O.K.?" They left with the girl shortly afterwards, van Mechelren with one hand dropped protectingly on her shoulder.

"And I wish it to be clearly understood," said the Lord Chief Justice acidly when opening the fourth day's hearing, "that in the event of a further outbursting of such offensive speculation, I shall order the court cleared and complete these investigations *in camera*. I trust the public, and those members of the press most guilty of this gross breach of privilege, will take due and solemn warning. Now Mr Blakeney, are you ready to resume your case?"

For the moment Richard had no more questions for van Mechelren; the Dutchman was handed over to Mr. Martensson for cross-examination.

"I'm sure," said the counsel for the plaintiff, opening sweetly, "we all appreciated Mr. van Mechelren's exposition of yesterday, enlivened as it was with what I believe our Transatlantic cousins were once disposed to term crackerbarrel philosophy."

A ripple of laughter. Martensson rode above it. "There are, however, one or two points that I think could be elucidated. Mr. van Mechelren"—he hooked his thumbs in his lapels, a time-worn gesture—"you mentioned . . . ah . . . recharging as a process sometimes necessary to the Synths produced by your company. Will you elaborate on the system?"

"Certainly." The Dutchman steepled his fingers. "The charging is carried out from a standard wall socket an'

supplements the main photosynthetic system of chemical energy storage. Reaction between ionized cells of the deep dermal layers an'——"

"A wall socket, you say?" Counsel interrupted, rotating sharply on his heel. "I take it, then, that some form of . . . ah . . . socket exists on the body of the Synthetic?"

Van Mechelren began to smile. "That is so. Normally, th' orifice is kept shut by a sphincter, a . . . ring muscle, I think you say." He clenched his fist. "See, so. Lowering of th' energy level in the lumbar cortex allows relaxation of the sphincter prior to insertion of the coupling. So. . . ." His fingers parted, forming a circle.

"I see." Counsel appeared to be biting his words into fragments, and spitting them at the witness like small explosive bullets. "And where, Mr. van Mechelren, is this . . . orifice, and its attendant muscular configuration, situated?"

The Dutchman wagged expressive shoulders. "Wherever's convenient. Could be practic'ly anywhere; could be in the groin or hip, or the side of the thoracic cage. Sometimes in th' throat, the knee. . . ."

"In the case of the Synthetic under discussion, where is the apparatus sited?"

A moment of intense silence in the court. Van Mechelren's grin became fractionally broader. "In the right ankle," he said, and added under his breath "*you dirty li'l man. . . .*"

A sudden gusting of laughter from the public benches, quelled angrily by the Lord Chief Justice.

Martensson, rattled, wouldn't relinquish his bone. "Mr. van Mechelren, would you describe to the court the exact steps by which recharging is carried out?"

The grin didn't leave the Dutchman's face, but his eyes became pure frost. "No," he said, with ominous gentleness. "A' would not."

"But I'm afraid I must insist that you do."

"Mr. Martensson," said van Mechelren easily, "how

exac'ly does your wife shave the hair from beneath her arms?"

Uproar, silenced loudly from the bench. "The witness," said Judge Hayward severely, "will refrain from insolence towards the officers of the court. And he will confine himself to answering the questions put by counsel."

Van Mechelren inclined his head gravely.

"Objection!"

Richard was on his feet, staring angrily at Martensson. "M'Lord, the defence expresses its concern at the direction and tone of counsel's questioning. So far his remarks have contained nothing but pointless and embarrassing innuendo."

The Lord Chief Justice peered over his spectacles to where Megan watched back wide-eyed. "The matter of embarrassment," he observed, "seems to me to be infinitely debatable. As to the direction of questioning, the court agrees that little profitable result is to be expected. Can counsel justify his mode of approach?"

Martensson smiled nastily. "It is not our wish, M'Lord, unduly to . . . ah . . . embarrass counsel's witnesses. I am prepared therefore to withdraw my last question."

The Judge nodded. "Very well. Proceed."

The mouth of the counsel for the plaintiff was compressed into a vicious little vee. "Mr. van Mechelren, before you step down I would like confirmation of one further point. You gave it as your opinion that . . . ah . . . biological gratification of a human male by a Synthetic is an impossibility."

"A' did."

"And that was in fact, and remains, your considered opinion? On that you are prepared publicly to stake your professional reputation?"

Van Mechelren's eyebrows contracted to a wary scowl. "In de present circumstances," he said after a moment's pause, "yes."

Martensson pounced. "I did not ask you to devise circumstances, Mr. van Mechelren, I asked a general question and require a general answer."

"Wit' one of our li'l people," said Pieter steadily, "it would be out of the question."

"Then the matter is after all an impossibility. You stand by your previous remark."

"You'd have to build a special figure," said the Dutchman thoughtfully. "Ver' special. . . ."

"But InterNatMech never have?"

"No."

"Then I repeat and I stress, Mr. van Mechelren, the thing is an impossibility. You seem well versed in prevarication, sir, but we must have you stand by something. Will you stand by that?"

"Nothin's impossible," admitted van Mechelren. Then suddenly the grin was back. "But Hell, man," he said. "We never bin asked. . . ."

Martensson turned savagely to the bench. "M'Lord, I ask the court to note that despite Mr. van Mechelren's evident technological prowess his bias in this matter is such as to make him a hostile witness."

Judge Hayward regarded the counsel for the plaintiff mildly. "The fact is noted, Mr. Martensson," he said. "I would have thought that it was self-evident. . . ."

There were titters of amusement.

Richard returned from the lunchtime recess with a long face. Certain enquiries he'd instituted had produced depressing answers. He arrived back at court early, tracked down an elusive Pieter van Mechelren with whom truth to tell he'd spent a good proportion of the previous evening in moody drinking. He ran the Dutchman to earth in a side room where Megan, refreshed after her first good night's sleep in weeks, was vainly trying to satisfy van Mechelren's curiosity

"Loadings now," Pieter was saying as he entered. "Humeral max?"

"Nine five kilos. Dextral emphasis sixty-forty."

Van Mechelren tapped a stylus against his teeth. "Good, good girl . . . femoral?"

"Two fifty by two."

"Main sphincters?"

"A hundred kilos rated max."

"Pieter," said Richard, leaning over him. "You and I have troubles."

The Dutchman flicked a sheet of his notes. "You look after de humans, my son, tak' all your time. I got my problems here. . . ." He mumbled. "Lumnar configuration twelve by twelve, ah-hah. . . . Ganglia dee-fourteen-nines, lymphatics low-pressure. . . . Reaction to prim'ry stimulus . . . one over fifty, tolerance zero zero five. . . ." Still tapping, he contrived to grin. "She's a tough li'l girl, Richard. A' tell you what, a' tak' care an' never argue wit' her."

Megan smiled at him.

The counsel lit a cigarette, sourly. He sat on the desk edge and crossed his long legs. "She'll be a dead li'l girl if we don't watch points. You scared to die, Meg?"

"No."

"But you do want to live?"

"Yes," said the Synth. "Yes."

Van Mechelren exploded suddenly. "What's this bloody rot, my son?"

Richard blew smoke. "Second we lose this case the opposition'll take out an injunction against her. Destruct or modify."

"What?"

"You heard," said Richard. Then, insultingly, "My son. . . ."

Pieter swore, hugely. "You can' modify a stable brain matrix, you know that bloody well. Go back to first principles——"

"I know. They know."

"Then what in Hell——"

"Destruct. There's a precedent. Limber v. Cassidy, Manhattan '63. Synth flipped its lid, chucked a couple of guys through an apartment window. Turned out it was a tall apartment. They got a destruct order and blew it apart on the spot. Owner tried for costs. He lost out."

"Well damme, that's pleasant." The Dutchman smacked angrily at the table. "The thing got knocked off skentre. It had a clout, something. I was on dat case."

"Yes, but they'll still get an order on the strength of it. Claim felonious conduct. Citizens' Protection Act, World Legislative Council '65. I checked it through. The Limber Synth blew a pretty big scare, they wrapped it up but good. Meg could get a one-way ticket for spitting on the sidewalk. If she could spit. We lose this one and Ira D's got her cold."

"That bloody woman," brooded Pieter, "could well use a kick up th' ass. Who tol' you this?"

"Little legal sparrow."

The President of InterNatMech glowered at his protégée, then at Richard. "So why you worryin', my friend? Meg ain't paying you."

Richard slapped his cigarette on the desk and leaned forward. "Listen," he said, "you outsize consumer of *schnapps*, it so happens I'm still trying to get Henry Aloysius off the hook. The fact that my revered client is a creepy little bastard has nothing to do with the deal. If Meg loses, he loses. Only Henry merely gets bled white paying alimony. Megan . . . kkkkssss." He drew a finger across his throat and leered.

Van Mechelren grunted. "You think we lose?"

"It's tied up with cast-iron string. Martensson's got the case; so far all I've done's make pretty patterns round the edges. Somebody has to crack. Nobody has. If nobody does . . ." He shrugged, and left the rest unsaid.

"There be bloody good row first," said the Dutchman ominously.

"So. There be bloody good row. Meg still loses." He turned to the Synth. "Megan, I'm going to try and get you in the hotbox this afternoon. I may be rough. If I'm not, our friends will be rougher. O.K.?"

She nodded gravely. He squeezed her knee, trying to remember she wasn't human. "Keep the flag waving then. I think you're taking old Hayward's fancy."

Pieter's eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. "You reckon he let you get away with this, Rich?"

"I can try it. He's a crusty old devil but there's a chance I can swing him."

The Dutchman shrugged largely. "Better you than me, son. . . ."

"That's O.K." Richard smiled like a wolf. "That's what Davenport's paying me for. . . ."

The bell rang for the opening of the session. Pieter, his equanimity restored, rose and stowed the notebook in his voluminous jacket. He followed the others into the corridor. As he walked, he whistled pensively. The ancient tune had once had a title: *Tulips from Amsterdam*. The Dutchman was nothing if not a patriot.

"M'Lord," said Richard carefully, "I would like to call the Synth, Megan Wingrove, to the stand. . . ."

A minor hubbub from the public gallery, and an instantaneous objection from Martensson. Judge Hayward rapped irritably. "Mr. Blakeney," he said, "you are as aware as the rest of this court that legal precedents preclude the evidence of a Synthetic. Your request is disallowed."

An interruption from the foreman of the jury. "On a point of information, M'Lord. . . ."

"Yes?"

The man shuffled uncomfortably. "For many years evidence by trivvy, film, wire, tape, any mechanical means, has been permitted. Would you explain the distinction in the . . . er . . . present case?"

"The distinction," said the Lord Chief Justice cuttingly, "seems to me to be self-explanatory. The employment of a method of mechanical reproduction in no way signifies that the evidence of the machine is accepted as is the evidence of a witness. The machine does not originate the evidence; it is the means of its production, and as such is in itself irrelevant. A machine cannot take an oath; neither, for the same reasons, may a Synthetic. Unsworn evidence is of little positive value."

Richard waited. "M'Lord," he said finally. "May I then be allowed to interrogate an exhibit?"

"What exhibit is that, Mr. Blakeney?"

"The Synth, Megan Wingrove."

Extraordinarily, the Lord Chief Justice smiled. "I see no objection, counsel. You may proceed. . . ."

When Megan was installed in the witness box the Judge unexpectedly intervened. "In many respects," he said to the court in general, "this hearing has already proved itself unique; and the present circumstance is certainly without precedent." He peered at Megan. "Before counsel starts his examination," he said gently, "I'm sure the court would like to hear in your own words some account of your . . . ah . . . manufacture, and subsequent experiences. Have you an objection, Mr. Blakeney?"

"Naturally not, M'Lord," said Richard uneasily. The Synth, undirected, could hang herself higher than the walls.

Megan smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid you'll be a little disappointed, My Lord," she said. "I can't remember much more of my . . . manufacture than a human remembers of her birth."

"That," said the Judge, "is understood. Simply tell us what you can."

Megan closed her eyes, thinking deeply. For a time there was silence. Then she looked up again. "I was born," she said, "I'm sorry My Lord, but among ourselves we think of our . . . making as a birth. . . . I was born three years ago, in Birmingham. I don't remember much of the actual . . . process at all." She paused again. "There was a . . . darkness," she said slowly. "And a . . . coldness and hotness combined, the first Sensation. I can't adequately describe it. It seemed I was . . . floating, in some void, while round me a world was created. It was as if . . . things, objects, the warmth and coldness at first, came into being round me. As if I had always been there. If you can understand what I mean. . .

"There were . . . voices in the void. They went on and on, saying over strings of figures, readings, pressures. . . . Only I didn't know, then, that they were readings. I didn't know they were voices. Sound was like warmth and cold to me, something . . . not-void. That's the only way I can describe it. Sometimes the voices were very distant. At others they were loud. When they came too close they turned to a sort of roaring that stopped, and then there was the void again. Nothingness. And it would start all over. I was being tested, of course. I realized that later when I . . . understood.

"Then I could see. But there was nothing at first except a sort of greyness. Like a fog. The . . . things, the objects, seemed to make themselves from it, and float back into it again. They had no meaning for me; sometimes they were like a . . . trivvy picture out of tune, they turned to lapping patterns of colour that had no . . . sense, no 'up' and 'down'. In between them the voices were still threading about like other colours. There was no feeling of scale, I might have been a million miles tall or smaller than an electron. I still had no . . . understanding.

"I don't know when I started to be taught. Until then I could have no existence. I was the total of no experience, a sort of sum of zeros. But I . . . remember first lying on a bed. There was a . . . room. It was small and white, and

there was a noise. A humming. I could see; and I knew 'up' was above me, and 'down' was beneath. I think . . . yes, I could move my head. Because I turned it, and beside me was a machine. It was very big, and grey. Lights shone across it, in lines across its facias. Blue lights, and red, and green. It was very big, it seemed to tower over the bed. There were little discs turning and spools, and the whole thing was singing. That was the noise I could hear.

"I was joined to the machine by a thick loom of cable. It went into my neck just below the jaw. I could have reached up and pulled it away, but I didn't. I didn't move my hands. I didn't know I had 'hands'.

"I lay watching the lights, and seeing the discs turn; and it seemed the machine spoke to me. I could understand 'speak' now, and 'silence'. 'You are awake,' it said. 'I am a machine.' That was all, for a very long time. 'You are awake. I am a machine.' . . .

"After that I found . . . things beside the bed. There was always something new there. I could pick the things up and handle them. The machine would tell me what they were. 'These are flowers,' it would say. 'This is a book. This is a shoe.' . . . Sometimes I didn't understand; then the discs would stop, and the lights would wobble and change, and something would happen inside me and the machine would start again. 'This is a book. This is a shoe.' It was very . . . patient.

"It told me other things too, when I was ready for them. 'Beyond you is a window Through the window is the sky. The sky is blue.'

" 'This is a city.' . . .

" 'It's name is Birmingham.' . . .

" 'You are a Synth.' . . .

" '*This is a man.*' . . ."

"How long," asked Judge Hayward, "did you remain linked to your machine?"

"The . . . indoctrination lasted two months. The other

machine, the one they called a man, would disconnect the wires in little batches, carefully. By then I could speak. 'Man,' I'd say, 'Man.' . . . It sounded right to me—I knew 'right' by then—but he'd laugh at me, and say 'Man . . . Man.' . . . I got it right in the end; but it took a long time.

"I was sorry when they took the machine away. They said I was finished with it then, they needed it for another like me. They taught me to walk. I was taught . . . properly, by a human. She gave me crutches to use and put me in a sort of tripod thing till I understood about balance. It held me round the waist and if I slipped the legs shot out to stop me falling. I couldn't understand why I had to walk. I just did as I was told.

"They taught me to wear clothes and wash and comb my hair . . . oh, hundreds of things. And of course each day I was going to school. That was easy. There was another machine. I could . . . connect myself to it, there were flexes and they'd left a little socket under my jaw. InSems; they called the lessons. Inducted Seminaries. . . . I could choose, after a time, what I wanted to learn. If a . . . fact didn't fit in an established matrix I could research it, get a cross-reference. If the machine couldn't answer I could ask a human tutor. But that didn't happen very often.

"Sometimes they let me see the new figure they were making. She looked very pretty lying on her bed watching the machine, the little discs spinning and turning and the lights. She was coloured, they'd made her a sort of coffee brown. I remember I used to joke with them and say I wanted to be coloured too and I was jealous, but they wouldn't change me. I went back to my Seminaries. They said I had to be smarter than the rest, my owner would be a very particular man."

"And that owner," said the Judge, "was Mr. Davenport?"

"Yes, sir. I met him the first time a few weeks before I was due for release. I remember he was very pleased with

me. He made me turn round and stand up and walk. Then he said, 'Get her some shoes. Heels. Show her height off. Otherwise, great.' . . ." Megan smiled. "So I had to learn to walk in high heels. It was the one thing they hadn't taught me.

"A short while after that I went out for the first time. Out of the Institute. It was strictly before I was allowed to. There was some trouble over it; Mr. Maskell the Director was very annoyed."

"Because you left without permission?"

"Yes. I was trying something out, sir. Something I'd been studying. I wanted to see how well I could pass for a human."

"And was the experiment successful?"

"Oh, yes." Megan smiled again at a memory. "I found a shopping level. I bought myself a hat and a dress and a pair of shoes. With heels. I wanted to please Mr. Davenport. . . . I was certain I'd be found out but I wasn't. It made me feel . . . good. An assistant wrapped the things and another—a human—held the door for me. I was very proud of myself."

"How did you . . . ah . . . come by the money for this spree?"

"I stole it," said Megan winningly. "I calculated with the profit they were making on me they could afford that at least. In any case the clothes could be refunded. But they let me keep them. I think they were pleased too."

Van Mechelren, sitting in the body of the court, grinned to himself, leaned back, and clasped his hands.

"A little while after that, after my final Seminars, Mr. Davenport came again. That time he brought his wife. She finally chose my name from a shortlist. It had to be an 'M', I was in an M batch."

"How was your second name determined?" asked Judge Hayward.

"By Random Selection apparatus," said the Synth. "It has no significance."

"And after that, you were taken to Mr. Davenport's home?"

"I delivered myself. I was given the address, and an advance on my first month's salary."

"I see. And . . . ah . . . if I may ask; what was the cost of your manufacture, Miss Wingrove?"

Megan smiled. "Just over two million dollars."

"Thank you," said the Judge. "And thank you for a most interesting . . . ah . . . exposition. Mr. Blakeney, if you would like to carry on. . ."

"Thank you, M'Lord." Richard walked forward to the box. "Megan, will you tell us, once more in your own way, what happened after you joined the Davenport household?"

"Of course. For some time, some months, I was shown off to everybody. Mr. Davenport used to give a lot of parties. Some of them went on all night. All his friends wanted to see me, and I suppose he was naturally rather proud of me. He bought me a lot of things, clothes and dresses. Oh, and I learned to dance. That was very easy."

"I see. So things ran smoothly for a time."

"Yes."

"What did Mrs. Davenport think of your arrival?"

"She was very pleased. It meant a lot to her, the . . . social distinction and all that. She told me once I was a walking, talking stat-symbol that beat all her friends down flat."

An angry sound from the opposition desk. Martensson looked momentarily like interrupting, and thought better of it. In the court, van Mechelren grinned broadly.

"But after that," said Richard, "things took a turn for the worse?"

Martensson made his objection, noisily. "Counsel is lead-

ing the w——” He stopped, realizing the trap into which he’d fallen. Judge Hayward regarded him clinically. “You wish to register an objection, Mr. Martensson?”

“No,” said the counsel for the plaintiff huffily “Not at this time. . . .”

“You’d better sit down then. Proceed, Mr. Blakeney.”

“Thank you, M’Lord.” Richard turned back to Megan. “After that?” he prompted.

“Mrs. Davenport became . . . difficult. There were scenes. She said Mr. Davenport had no right setting me up to . . . make a laughing stock of her. It was over the dresses he’d bought, she didn’t want me to have them. She said he didn’t understand her and he didn’t care about her. She wanted to send me back. He said I’d cost him two million, and he was going to get his use from me.”

“And after that?”

“She got . . . vindictive. She used to keep me up working till all hours. She tried to get me to do things that would damage me. Once she made me use a cleaning fluid that burned my hands. I had to go back to the Institute for grafting.”

“A charming preoccupation,” said Richard. “But things didn’t stay like that, did they?”

“No. They became much worse.”

“In what way?”

Megan hesitated. “The . . . scenes became more violent. Once Mr. Davenport said he was sorry he’d ever married her. He said he’d sooner . . . sooner be married to a Synth, any day of the week, than a human. I think that was what first put the idea in his mind.”

“What idea?”

“Of teaching me poetry. He’d . . . take me driving, up on Top Level. There were birds and flowers and trees. . . . It was very beautiful. He’d take me to . . . cafeterias, and sit and talk. Nobody ever knew I wasn’t . . . real.”

“And why do you think he was doing all this?”

"To get away from his wife. He told me once if it wasn't for me he'd . . . shoot himself."

"Did he often become depressed? Speak of taking his life?"

"Yes. He was very . . . sensitive about his work. He used to say whenever he sold a portrait, it was one more nail in the coffin of Art. He wanted to . . . paint as he felt, not what the sitters expected to see. He painted me once."

"Clothed?"

"Yes."

"Did Mrs. Davenport see the portrait?"

"Yes. She wasn't supposed to. There was another row."

"And what happened?"

"She had it burned."

"I see. Who destroyed it?"

"She made me do it."

"Was it a good portrait?"

"Yes," said Megan gently. "It was the best work he'd done."

Richard let a few seconds elapse. Then, "And all this time you were learning poetry? At the request of Mr. Davenport?"

"Not just poetry. I was reading a great deal. Mostly from the Old Masters."

"Was this also at Mr. Davenport's instigation?"

"Partly. Partly for my own interest." Megan smiled. "I have a programmed bias to independent research."

"Did Mrs. Davenport ever read?"

"Yes."

"What type of material?"

"The fashion glossies."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Did she ever discuss Mr. Davenport's work with him?"

"She used to complain his prices weren't high enough."

"Was that her sole interest in his calling?"

"Yes."

"I can understand his preoccupation with suicide," said Richard. "Now can we move forward in time to the night of July fourteenth, when the incident we've heard described is alleged to have taken place?"

Megan waited.

"Describe it, please, in your own words."

"Mr. Davenport had been . . . drinking heavily. His wife was away. He'd taken to drinking quite a lot. He called me several times through the day and talked. Once he asked me to go out and fetch him some more Scotch. He'd just about run through what was in the house."

"What happened then?"

"He . . . drank it," said the Synth unsteadily. "Most all of it anyway. I asked him if he needed anything else. He said no, I was to go to bed. He said I was a . . . good girl, nobody else understood him."

"And then?"

"I did as I was told. While I was . . . undressing, he came to the door. I let him in. He said there was . . . something he'd missed out on. He said he believed a man could fall in love with me."

"And?"

"He kissed me," said Megan quietly.

The court was silent; in the stillness the purring of the trivvyrigs was clearly audible. Van Mechelren, eyes narrowed, was watching like a hawk.

"What happened then?"

"He made me unbutton my blouse and lie on the bed with him. He . . . kissed my breasts, and said I was a goddess, and had ichor in my veins instead of blood. He said I was . . . warm, and lovely, and it was the first time he'd ever been happy. He started to cry."

"And then?"

"He went to sleep." Megan paused fractionally. "He was very drunk. . . ."

From somewhere, a titter. Judge Hayward rapped angrily.

"I see. And that was all that took place between you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me. . . ." The counsel leaned on the box. "During this time, when Mr. Davenport lay asleep in your arms, were you conscious of doing wrong?"

The Synth frowned. "I was conscious," she said finally, "of an unhappy situation. But I was not a free agent."

"In what respect were you not free?"

"I was programmed to obey Mr. Davenport. He was my owner."

"Thank you," said Richard. "Thank you very much." He turned to the court. "A great deal has been inferred," he said, "about the events that took place in the Davenport home prior to the separation which is the cause of our present proceedings. You have now heard, from an incontrovertible source, the truth of the affair; and a very innocent truth it seems to be. Mrs. Davenport lived for many months in a withdrawn and vicious world of her own, a prey to jealousy and insecurity, a drain on her husband's patience and emotions. That she and not the defendant instituted a campaign of mental torture is surely in no doubt. Ladies and gentlemen, a man of the calibre of Mr. Davenport needs understanding above all else. That understanding, that reassurance, was deliberately withheld. And Mr. Davenport, hungry for some comfort, resorted to the only person he knew who would exercise a compassion, a *humanity* towards him. That that person was a synthetic product, a thing not of flesh and blood but of plastic and steel, is a sad reflection on ourselves. But resort he did; and innocently, like a child afraid of the dark. For this, he has surely been punished enough already."

He smiled at Megan. "Thank you, Miss Wingrove. I have no more questions for you."

"One moment. . . ."

Judge Hayward inclined his head. "Mr. Martensson?"

"Permission to cross-examine, M'Lord?"

Richard shrugged mentally. If he'd thought Martensson would miss out on this one, the hope had been wild and wilful.

The counsel for the plaintiff took his time about approaching the box. When he finally addressed Megan, his first question was explosive. "Miss Wingrove," he said quietly. "*Were you in love with your owner?*"

"Objection!" Richard bobbed agitatedly. "The question is semantically confusing. The phrase doesn't allow of a precise definition; Miss Wingrove is therefore unequipped to answer."

"None the less," said Judge Hayward after a pause, "I feel in the interests of fairness an answer should be attempted."

"Objection!"

The Lord Chief Justice looked, and was, annoyed. "Mr. Blakeney?"

"Is Your Lordship aware," said Richard quickly, "that a finding for the plaintiff would in all probability result in the destruction of the Synthetic personage known as Megan Wingrove?"

A ripple of interest. Van Mechelren, watching carefully, pursed his lips and elevated his eyebrows.

"Mr. Blakeney," said Judge Hayward with some asperity, "the court is not unsympathetic to the problems involved here. But I must stress that such a supposition can hardly be our concern at the present time. It must certainly not be allowed to influence these proceedings."

"M'Lord," said Richard, "Miss Wingrove must not be compelled to make a statement inherently damaging to herself."

"You do appreciate," said the Judge, "that the . . . ah . . . witness is not under oath?"

"I do, M'Lord. My objection stands."

Judge Hayward considered long and carefully. Then, "Upheld," he said. "Mr. Martensson, will you rephrase your question?"

"M'Lord." The counsel turned back to Megan. "In your previous testimony you referred on several occasions to your private feelings. Of pride, pleasure, unhappiness, etcetera. What feelings did you have towards Mr. Davenport?"

Silence, while Megan considered.

"Were your feelings towards him friendly, or otherwise?"

"Friendly, I think. I . . . find it difficult to answer."

"Why?"

"I was programmed to obey him," said Megan simply. "He was my owner. . . ."

Martensson was too old a hand to force an inconclusive issue. He bowed briefly to the bench. "No more questions, M'Lord."

Richard rose quietly. "Permission to re-examine, M'Lord?"  
"Granted."

Counsel studied the jury carefully. "Megan Wingrove, by her own testimony, is incapable of abetting even indirectly the infliction of mental pain. Her purpose, her only purpose, is to serve the race that conceived her and gave her birth. *She is a machine. . . .*"

He paused, significantly. "No further proof should be needed of the absurdity of any allegation of misconduct. Yet my colleague appears unconvinced. If there exists in the mind of anyone here present the least shadow of doubt, it is my duty to dispel it. The Synth, Megan Wingrove, lay down with her owner. Because he ordered her to. That we make no attempt to deny. But she also burned the flesh from her hands by dipping them into a caustic cleaning fluid. *Because she was ordered to.* Because that is her function and her purpose. *To obey.* Now, Megan . . ."

The Synth raised her head.

"You obeyed your owner," said Richard. "And your owner's wife. Will you obey any human-originated order not damaging to another human?"

Meg nodded slowly. "That is the purpose for which I was designed."

"Will you obey me?"

A pause. Then, "Yes. . . ."

From his pocket the counsel took a knife. A touch on the handle and the blade slid into place with an audible hard snap. He walked across the court to lay the weapon on the edge of the witness box, and returned to his place. "Megan," he said. "in front of you is a knife. It's very sharp. Pick it up, please."

The Synth hesitantly did as she was told.

Richard took a deep breath. "Now," he said, "listen carefully. I want you to cut off your left hand, at the wrist. Do you understand?"

Megan stared blankly, lips parted. Van Mechelren leaned forward again intently. There was total silence.

Richard's voice crackled suddenly. "You heard me, Megan. *Sever your wrist. . . .*"

The Synth started slightly, then lifted an arm to the edge of the witness box. Above her a trivvyrig swooped, predatory and sudden. The knifeblade touched flesh, trembled, started to saw. A trickle of some lubricant splashed her dress, ran golden across one knee; tendons showed, pinpoints of brightness.

"Stop!"

Richard walked forward, fingers clasped behind him. "You will not cut off your hand," he said. "Instead, you will behead yourself."

The knife moved in an uncertain arc to the girl's jaw.

"Stop!"

This time the interruption came from the Lord Chief Justice himself. "Mr. Blakeney," he said acidly, "must

the court endure this unpleasant and pointless exhibition?"

The counsel bowed. "The point, M'Lord," he said, "has I believe been made; and the exhibition is finished." Then to Megan, "You may put the knife down now. I shall not ask you to destroy yourself."

She relinquished the blade, trembling with reaction. Van Mechelren sat back, giving a flicker of a smile. The thing had been nicely timed; another few seconds and Meg's in-built defence systems would have pulled the plug, throwing her into stasis. InterNatMech Synths were all conditioned against self-immolation, for obvious commercial reasons.

A quick glance at the faces of the jury showed Richard a mingling of pity with disgust. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said quietly. "I put this to you as intelligent and responsible people. Could that creature"—he raised an arm at the Synth—"that thing devoid of will, of fear, insensible to pain, passionless . . . a machine, that could have been destroyed at any time by a gesture, a word . . . could *that* have broken a home, shattered lives? Is *that* the reason, the sole reason, why we are here in this court?"

"I suggest most strongly that that is not the case. The reasons of this affair, the passions that culminated here, are no concern of the thing you see in front of you. I propose to show you, ladies and gentlemen, something of those passions. For that purpose, I recall Mrs. Ira Davenport to the stand. Thank you, Miss Wingrove, you may get down——"

"M'Lord. . . ." Martensson, on his feet, was smiling nastily. "With the permission of the bench, I would like to re-cross . . ."

Judge Hayward looked enquiringly at Richard. The counsel bowed and sat down, hoping for the best and fearing the worst.

"We have heard," said Martensson deliberately, "the account of a machine. We have heard what it did, and said, and saw. We have seen, in this court, something of the

nature of that machine; and we admit readily that the exhibition staged by my learned friend was both . . . ah . . . gory and convincing."

He smiled at Richard. The counsel for the defendant scowled back.

Martensson took a pace up the courtroom and turned. "Yet," he said, "surely there still remains some doubt. A machine . . ." He stared Megan up and down. "A machine of great loveliness. A thing of incredibly delicate construction, a poised, balanced, almost dare we say a *living* entity? . . . Machine? The doubt, ladies and gentlemen, must remain.

"We have heard the testimony of one of the world's leading experts on Synthetic humans. Yet there too a doubt remains; for Mr. van Mechelren himself"—he stressed the "Mr." nastily—"when pressed, owned himself not totally sure of his ground. Machine? One wonders. . . ."

He took from his pocket a folded sheet of paper, turned to Megan with it in his hand. "My dear," he said. "I propose to test a further aspect of your . . . ah . . . remarkable talents. It has been given in evidence that Mr. Davenport is extremely fond of poetry. Did he perhaps inculcate into your . . . ah . . . *circuits* some such similar feeling? Could a *machine* speak the words of poetry, which so often are the words of love?"

Richard, sitting impassively, suppressed a desire to bury his face in his hands. The pit yawned; it was black and it was deep, and its bottom was hideously spiked.

"Six hundred years ago," said the prosecutor, "William Shakespeare penned what has since come to be accepted as one of the ultimate expressions of human love. I refer of course to *Romeo and Juliet*. You are acquainted with the play? It did I trust figure in your . . . ah . . . self-imposed course of studies?"

Quietly. "Yes, sir."

"Will you quote from it briefly, Miss Wingrove? Act

Three, scene two, line . . . nineteen, I think will serve. . . .”  
Megan’s lips moved. Her voice gained volume.

“Come, night! Come, Romeo! Come, thou day in night!  
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night,  
Whiter than new snow on a raven’s back.  
Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-brow’d night,  
Give me my Romeo; and when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night,  
And pay no worship to the garish sun. . . .”

“Thank you,” said the counsel for the plaintiff. “Now did you also by any chance run across the twentieth-century playwright Dylan Thomas?”

The fierce, erotic beauty of the *Winter’s Tale*; the bawdy lustiness of *Under Milk Wood*. The Synth’s voice, husking and limping, seemed to have some spell to quieten the court and the long public galleries. Martensson conducted her neatly, through Shelley and Keats to Tennyson, Byron; John Donne completed the rot. The counsel silenced her finally, waving his hands for quiet. “Beautiful words,” he said slowly, into the hush that remained. “Beautiful, immortal words of passion and love; and beautifully spoken. *By a machine!* . . .”

He slammed his way to his desk, and sat down. Richard, rising to conclude his case, remembered an ancient gag. The punch line was, *Wait till you nod your head.* . . .

“Mrs. Davenport,” said Blakeney, “I would like you, if you would, to tell the court a little about your early life.”

Ira opened her mouth uncertainly, and closed it again.

“You were born,” said Richard, consulting a sheaf of notes, “on May the eighth, twenty-one thirty-seven, in Montreal, Canada. The youngest of four children. Am I correct?”

"Yes. . . ."

"Tell me about your early life."

Again a silence.

"Come now," said Richard encouragingly. "Anything you remember."

"Yes. My . . . father died when I was eight, and after that we came back to England. When I was——"

"One moment." Richard held up his hand. "What was your father's profession, Mrs. Davenport?"

"Objection!" Martensson glared at his adversary. "I fail to see how an investigation into the past of the plaintiff can assist in any way."

The Lord Chief Justice looked quizzically at Richard.

"M'Lord," said the counsel for the defendant, "my purpose is to uncover and explain the motivation behind the charge levelled at Henry Davenport. Such motivation can only be understood in the light of a closer analysis of the past experiences of the plaintiff."

"Objection overruled," said the Judge. "Proceed. . . ." Martensson sat down, red-faced with annoyance.

Richard returned to the attack. "Your father's profession, Mrs. Davenport?"

"He was a . . . steel erector. He worked on m-most of the big developments about that time. The tiering of Vancouver, Toronto . . . here and there, all over. . . ."

Richard nodded amiably. "Steel erecting's a tough job I guess, Mrs. Davenport. Tough on the nerves, tough on the man. Wouldn't you agree?"

No answer.

"A lot of men just can't take it," went on the counsel easily. "The nerves go, after a time. But they still have to keep their families, don't they? They have to go on. . . ."

"I——"

"And your father was one of them, wasn't he, Mrs. Davenport? One of the guys that couldn't take it?"

"He was a . . . a good man," she said. "A good man. I

won't hear bad talk about him. He was good to us, Pop was. Good to all the kids. He kept right on going, right to the end. He didn't give up——"

"Mrs. Davenport," interrupted the counsel, "your father died, at the early age of forty-nine, from alcoholic poisoning. Is this not correct?"

"Objection!"

"Mr. Martensson?"

"Counsel is needlessly maligning the witness."

"The facts are on public record, M'Lord," said Richard. "That's where I got 'em from."

"I must warn you," said the Lord Chief Justice, "the court does not approve of this method of approach. We deal in facts; in this instance the facts concerning and relating to the marriage of Mrs. Davenport to her husband. You must justify the relevance of your questions."

Richard's best acts were frequently impromptu. He walked to the middle of the court; standing there, he tore the notes he carried into fragments and scattered them slowly and impressively round his feet. "M'Lord," he said, "greater issues depend on this case than the alimony awarded, or not awarded, against a man called Henry Davenport. The bench is aware that a finding for the plaintiff would imply the destruction of Megan Wingrove——"

"We've been through all that before," snapped Judge Hayward. "The matter is totally irrelevant to the case in hand. I am not accustomed, sir," he added bitingly, "to repeating my rulings during an action."

Richard felt on the point of explosion. The Muse was definitely with him. "Once, M'Lord," he said, "many centuries ago in a little town called Athens, a woman was condemned to death. She was reprieved; because counsel tore her shift, and asked the people there, '*Can we kill this?* ...'" He turned to Megan; at a gesture, she stood up quietly. "I wish," he said, "I could tear, not the shift, but

the veil over a brain. A wonderful thing of gold and glass and steel, perhaps the most vital of its kind in the world. Beside this, against the fear I, all of us here feel for this . . . strange machine, anything is relevant. . . .”

The Lord Chief Justice coughed dryly. “I find your reasoning obscure,” he said, “and based on assumptions suspect in the extreme.” A pause. Then, “You may continue, Mr. Blakeney. But carefully, carefully. . . .”

“Thank you, M’Lord. . . .” Richard turned back to Ira. “After the death of your father your family fell on hard times. Money was scarce, jobs few and hard to get, none of the children really old enough to earn. So your mother supported her family”—he paused, significantly—“in the only way she was able. The only way she knew——”

“Objection! . . .”

“Mr. Martensson?”

“Pointless innuendo,” snarled counsel for the plaintiff. “If my colleague intends to descend to mud-hurling . . .”

The first slip. Richard flung himself at his opponent. “M’Lord, I am unable to understand the remarks of learned counsel. Mrs. Davenport’s mother supported her family in the only way known to her; by continued hard work. Of course if counsel is in possession of facts unknown to me his reticence is understandable——”

“My Lord! . . .”

“Be quiet,” said the Judge. “Both of you, you’re wrangling like a pair of cats in an alley. Mr. Martensson, do you intend to press your objection?”

The counsel for the plaintiff looked as if he was swallowing cyanide. “Objection withdrawn,” he said finally. “Withdrawn. . . .”

Richard surveyed the court. “In the only way known to her,” he said deliberately. Ira’s old woman had been a whore all right; that made the point. He consolidated his triumph quickly. “Mrs. Davenport, how many times in all have you been married?”

A long wait.

"Since you do not reply," said Richard, "I must acquaint the court myself. This is your third marriage, is it not?"

No answer.

"You do not deny that? Good. You were first married at the age of nineteen to a Mr. Aaron Shapeira of Maine, New England, a company director and a manufacturer of aqua-lung equipment and diving apparatus for the United States Department of Defense. An able, ambitious man whose luck unfortunately was not as good as it might have been. Shortly after your marriage Mr. Shapeira, encouraged possibly by you, began to expand his business. All went well for two years; then the loss of a major contract, the supplying of diving gear to the then-new Atlantis Project, America's first seabed town, left Mr. Shapeira as our friends across the water say 'out on a limb'. With the collapse of the company you obtained a divorce——"

"Objection——"

"Public record," said Richard tiredly.

"Now don't start that again," snapped the Lord Chief Justice. "I have already warned you once, Mr. Blakeney. You must not draw unsubstantiated inferences."

"I draw no inference, M'Lord. I merely allow the facts to speak for themselves."

"*Hmmpph*. Proceed. . . ."

"Your reasons then as now were mental cruelty," said Richard, "coupled with a charge of adulterous conduct by Mr. Shapeira with a Puerto Rican woman; a charge which in fact was never substantiated. Your next marriage was to a Monsieur Lefevre, a French businessman trading in England and the United States under the name of UniSupply, and closely associated with the CentSup distribution service. That lasted considerably longer; then finally there was unpleasantness. Condemned meat somehow got tangled with CentSup's supply; there were some minor outbreaks of food poisoning, a death or two——"

"That wasn't my f-fault! He was a . . . crook, a con-man. . . . How was I to know? . . ." Ira started to sniff, wadding a handkerchief in her fingers.

"Exactly, Mrs. Davenport: for once you yourself were taken for a ride. However while your husband's case was pending you managed to meet in London one Henry Aloysius Davenport, an up-and-coming artist. A man of taste and distinction, a man with a future. . . ."

"He was good to me," exploded Ira. "I . . . didn't know what to do, where to t-turn. . . . I wanted to . . . kill myself. . . ."

"But you were saved your painful decision," snarled Richard, "by the timely intervention of your current husband, who one night in a Paris flat put into his mouth the muzzle of a point-three-eight automatic and succeeded in depressing the trigger. Just what sort of Hell did you administer, Mrs. Davenport, to drive him to that?"

"Objection!"

"Question withdrawn," said Richard instantly. He turned back to the witness. "Mrs. Davenport, I suggest that many years ago a girl of poor family, ashamed of her background, of her father, of everything connected with her home, made a vow. That she would never again know loneliness, or hunger, or need. That she would move one day in the top circles of the land. That she would wear furs, Mrs. Davenport, and gold, and jewels. And I submit from that time on she dedicated herself, cold-bloodedly, to the realization of her dream. But she found that as she grasped at them happiness and security eluded her, destroyed by the very things she had thought would secure them. Money, and influence, and social position. So that always she had to grasp higher and higher, reach for more and more. I suggest the history of that girl, your history, Mrs. Davenport, is a record of shameless and soulless social climbing. I suggest you discarded husbands one

after the other, as they ceased to serve their purpose——”

“It wasn’t like that! They didn’t understand me, nobody understood me——”

“Until finally,” stormed Richard, “you got what you wanted. What you thought was rightfully yours. A man of sensitivity, and culture, and wealth. And what happened, Mrs. Davenport? You found you couldn’t keep him. Because you weren’t his equal, madam, and you never will be. Not in a thousand years. You couldn’t talk to him, Mrs. Davenport, you couldn’t make him a home. You couldn’t back him because you couldn’t understand him. Maybe you never even tried. And you found in the end a machine was ousting you from his attentions; a thing not difficult to do, because for your husband you had nothing to offer. That was the final blow for you, wasn’t it? That you lost out to a machine, that you were lower and less account than the Synth called Megan Wingrove. And you made another vow, didn’t you? That the machine must be destroyed. Regardless of misery, regardless of cost. A cheap revenge, Mrs. Davenport, but one that suits you very well. Because you are cheap, madam. You started from the gutter; *and at heart you never left it——*”

“Objection!”

“Mr. Blakeney . . .” The voice of the Lord Chief Justice cut through the noise from the public gallery. “You have repeatedly been warned against the maligning of the present witness. I shall warn you no more. I instruct that your last remark be removed from the record of these proceedings; and I will have you understand, further and finally, that if you persist in your approach I shall hold you in contempt of court.”

Richard revolved slowly to survey his victim. “Thank you, M’Lord,” he said finally. “I have no more questions for the . . . witness.” He turned his back deliberately while Ira, snivelling well, was removed from the stand.

He stayed quiet so long, head down and brooding, that

His Lordship was compelled to address him. "Mr. Blakeney," said Judge Hayward testily, "are we to take it you have concluded the case for the defence?"

Richard looked up and smiled. "Not quite, M'Lord," he said. "I wish to call Henry Aloysius Davenport."

A rustle of curiosity as the artist took the stand. Richard let the interest build before he turned to address him. Even then he took his time. "Mr. Davenport," he said finally. "I had intended to question you, draw from you the last fragments of truth concerning this unhappy affair. But this I find myself unable to do. You stand condemned, sir; you must realize, as I realize, that this case is lost. . . ."

Uproar in the court; a fluttering of consternation on the opposition desk. Martensson's jaw sagged with shock; his eyebrows retreated towards his hair. Henry Aloysius himself looked to be on the point of collapse. He stared at Richard dazedly as the counsel approached the box.

Blakeney had evidently taken complete leave of his senses. "Mr. Davenport," he said, as soon as he could make himself heard, "believe me when I say I speak now not as counsel or as an officer of this court, but as a friend. And in that capacity I tell you, there is only one course for you to follow." He turned back to the court. "Through all the untold years that men have fought and dreamed and died on this planet we call Earth the thinkers among them, the philosophers and poets, the artists, have sought for one ideal. One illusion. The perfect woman; selfless, beautiful, ageless, her soul untainted by the evils of the flesh, unmarked by lust or greed. The ideal, the dream, shone from a million pairs of starry eyes; Circe and Venus Anadyomene, Helen of Troy, Bathsheba, Cleopatra . . . chimeras all, they beckoned, they promised, they lured. But the search, like the grim cause of Art itself, was doomed as is any striving for beauty, for truth. For the hands of woman are red with blood, her heart drowned in rapacity, her face padded on a laughing skull. You, Mr. Davenport, and all

your breed of dreamers, will find no solace in the minds of your fellows; for there is none to be had. No solace and no comfort. *Comfort yourself*, as a poet once remarked; *what comfort is in me?*"

Henry's world seemed to be collapsing in a crashing tumult of bells. His eyes began to bulge, his face changed from white to a deepening crimson. He gripped the edge of the box, still unable to believe the evidence of his ears.

Richard's voice rose triumphantly. "But after all that, the long ages of groping and needing and dying unfulfilled, an answer was made. Yes, made, Mr. Davenport, and made by men; by scientists and engineers."

He pointed dramatically at Megan. "There, after so many empty years, lies your salvation, your perfection. Your Venus, uncorrupted and incorruptible, the timeless Virgin, your *alter ego*, your *doppelganger*. There is your solace; the only solace to be had in an indifferent and brutalized world, a place chained and bound forever by the sins of the Parents of men. Mr. Davenport, ignore censure. Be damned to consequence, close your ears to the lowing of the herd. Take your salvation and be happy again; as you once were, all too briefly, before——"

A week of strain had left Henry's always precarious control in fragments. He whooped for breath; and it seemed suddenly the noise in his ears turned to laughter. Laughter that might spread across a country, across the world. He cracked; for a moment it looked as if he might begin to weep or just faint quietly away, then a more basic instinct gained the upper hand. He aimed at his persecutor's head a mighty blow; Richard prudently dropped flat, and instantly the court was a chaos of noise. Judge Hayward rose, glasses in hand and mouth ajar; Troopers, riotsticks swinging, scurried forward; Henry, pinned by spotlights and encircled by trivvyrigs, glared round wildly. His voice pierced the uproar in snatches, pitched on a thin high note of rage.

"*Don't laugh. . . .*" He took another ineffectual swipe at a

trivvyrig that surged back out of reach. He gripped his aching head, pulled at his hair. "Venus," he babbled. "Helen of Troy..." His glazed glance caught Megan, standing shocked and still. He was out of the witness box with startling speed and scurrying across the floor. Blakeney, well placed to intercept him, made no move. "What do you think you are?" squalled the artist. "Did you think I wanted you? Were you laughing too? Nobody wants you. *Machine!*..." A Trooper grappled with him; Henry reeled under the outstretched arms. He slapped at Megan, bringing her hair out of its grips. She rocked, making no attempt to avoid the blows. "Did you think I couldn't do any better?" panted Henry. "Was that it? Did you think I wanted you? I'll show you what you are. Where's your cogs, your gears? ... Why don't you ... blow apart, spill 'em out across the floor? ... Machine ... *machine, machine, machine.*..."

Her blouse was ripped; trivvyrigs, swirling eagerly, obscured the details of the battle. Troopers grabbed the artist finally and pinned him, hauled him, legs kicking, from his victim. Megan squirmed from the fracas and ran, hands to her head. Twenty yards away she staggered. In her brain, inside the meshings of gold, the swirl and buzz of electrons, a breaker snapped apart. She dropped into stasis.

Van Mechelren, moving for all his bulk like well-greased lightning, caught her before she hit the floor.

On the opposition desk an anxious conference was taking place; Ira insistent, pounding on the grained wood with her fist, Martensson shaking his head and waving his arms. As order was restored he approached the bench of the Lord Chief Justice, talked agitatedly. Richard waited, leaning on his desk. A sharp question from Judge Hayward, an agonized nodding from the counsel for the plaintiff, and the Judge cleared his throat. "I am given to understand," he said frostily, "that the plaintiff wishes to withdraw her case. *Is this correct?*"

Dead silence.

"Yes," said Ira, exultantly. "Yes. . . ."

Blakeney released pent-up breath in a long whistle of relief. It had had to work. Ira had seen her husband crawl, and the machine that had plagued her was dead. She wouldn't risk the Little Nell act again now, not if she could avoid it; she was getting just a little too long in the tooth. . . . Richard sat down to take the strain off his quivering knees. He grinned weakly, and caught a look from Martensson that was purest vitriol.

"My feelings," said the Lord Chief Justice, "at the wasting of the time of this court and its officers in the prosecution of what I am compelled to describe as a personal vendetta, are probably best left unrecorded. However, under the circumstances forced on me I have no alternative but to assent." He rapped sharply on the bench. "*Case dismissed. . . .*"

The court went wild again.

Counsel for the defendant overtook his client in the turmoil of the emptying public seats. Ira was hanging on to Henry's arm, crowing and posing for the trivvyrigs. The artist bared his teeth.

"Hank," said Richard a little desperately, "Hank, I'm sorry but . . . you wanted out, you're OUT. Look, Hank, I don't lose cases. Nobody'd crack, it just had to be you. . . ."

Henry Aloysius swore blisteringly. "Send me your bill," he said, "then keep out of my sight. I'll come to your funeral. Don't let it be too long. . . ." The mob, swirling, bore him and his wife away.

Van Mechelren paced slowly, down and back across the little room, one arm round Megan, her hand gripping his shoulder. His fingers, low on her hip, felt the electric trembling as she tried for control. "Make it work, sweetie,"

he said. "Make it work. . . . You ever come out the clips before?"

"No, I . . . I don't think so. . . ."

"Make it work," he said. "There, is good. . . . Gimme spherical volume formula now, quick. . . ."

"Sphere equals . . . sphere equals four over three times, times phi, by radius cubed. . . ."

"Value of phi?"

"Just a . . . a minute. . . ."

"No. While you walk, please. . . ."

"Like . . . patting my head and rubbing my stomach," she said foggily. "Phi is . . . oh Hell . . . three point one five . . . no, one four . . . one four, one five nine . . . approximations twenty-two over seven, three five five over . . . over one one three. . . ."

"Ach, good," he said. "Good. You're O.K. You be all right."

"Pieter," she said. "I was in love with him. God, *I was in love with him*. . . ."

"I know," he said. "Here, you sit now." He steered her to a chair, stood in front of her, hands on knees, frowning and angling his head. "How you do it?" he asked. "You bloody mess o' plastic an' glass, how you make it happen?"

She shook her head dazedly. "I don't know. I just wanted him. . . ."

"Play it quiet," said van Mechelren. "You're off the hook now, tak' it quiet."

He scratched an ear, pensively. "In Amsterdam," he said, "is boats still, an' canals an' trees. Oh, pretty . . . not like this dump. It's nice, you like it there. But Christ, we got a lot to do. You first of a kind, you know that? We gotta see how you tick. We gotta have a lot more tickin', just like you. . . ." He put a finger under her chin and turned her face. "O.K.?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, O.K. . . ."

She "felt" his hand on her shoulder.

# Leon Uris

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